

SPRING  
1945

# PLANET STORIES 20c

STRANGE ADVENTURES  
IN OTHER WORLDS  
THE UNIVERSE OF  
FUTURE CENTURIES



## THE SILVER PLAGUE

FROM NOWHERE CAME  
THE HORROR OF THE  
GLITTERING DEATH...  
A NOVELET OF TIMES  
TO COME — By

ALBERT De PINA

An Amazing  
Novelet

## The VANISHING VENUSIANS

By Leigh Brackett





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# PLANET STORIES



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# The Sandhound Strikes

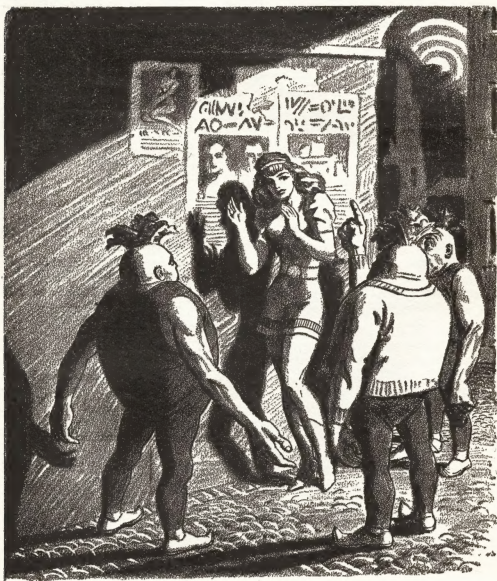
By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

**Once again the Sandhound, that rakish freebooter of the spaceways, was stalking the rusty sands of Mars. He was searching for the answer to a dread enigma, risking his life—to save a hot-headed lovely girl who hated his guts.**

THE SANDHOUND walked alone tonight, but he knew that he walked with danger. He strode down Martian Way, that famed avenue which extended from end to end of Satterfield City like an axle on which all life revolved. Around him flowed the shallow upper crust of Martian cafe society. On every side

were garishly radiant show-places, theatres, shopping centers; bejeweled and begowned women, clad in their glittering, glass-fur coats, hanging onto the arms of their swains. But it was not they who presented danger to the Sandhound. The danger lay in that man who followed the Sandhound.

The Sandhound's stride seemed to be





easy and relaxed, but in reality, his every muscle was tense, and there was on his lean, tanned face the imperceptible fighting smile of a man who welcomes honest danger. His pursuer was a novice at the game, so awkwardly did he reveal himself. But the Sandhound knew that the real danger lay in Clay Marybrook, industrial tsar of Satterfield City. Clay Marybrook, the Sandhound's sworn enemy. Clay Marybrook—so the Sandhound's thoughts ran—who might or might not be connected with the murder of a sorogaster Wednesday night.

Was this man who shadowed him employed by Marybrook? It could hardly be doubted.

The Sandhound was as physically wary, as physically agile, as the swift animal of the ferrous-oxide deserts after which he had named himself. He waited his moment, and when he came abreast a cavern-black alley, he twisted himself sideways, and disappeared into its mouth. A hundred feet he impelled his perfectly groomed body, then stopped with his back against a wall. The cane he carried was not a cane in the ordinary sense of the word, and his eyes sparkled as his fingers experimentally released and recalled the deadly little poison needle in the tip.

But even the sandhound, that wind-swift animal, can err in its calculations and receive a fatal scratch from those killer-rats which are its chief source of food.

The Sandhound so erred. There was the scuffling of a foot behind him, and the jarring blow which shook his brain in its skull-pan, and completely, shockingly, divested him of awareness.

**I**N ANOTHER part of Satterfield City, at this exact moment, a man lay on the silk coverlet of his hotel bed, his abnormally broad-shouldered body knotted with the powerful muscles of one who has lived much of his life on the deep-gravity worlds. His face was a scarred expanse of flesh, silent narrator of bloody battles. His bladed nose bent sidewise in a direction acutely different from that nature had intended it to follow. This man was fast caught in a sleep that was highly similar to death. His name was Bozo Dullard.

And at that moment—that exact moment—when the Sandhound was struck



from behind, this sleeping man broke out in sweat, shuddering. In his sleep, he half-way raised himself to one elbow, and then slowly, slowly, dropped back again, a fierce uneasiness crossing his ruined features, his eyelids twitching.

**T**HE Sandhound awoke. And opened his eyes. He was staring up into the face of Clay Marybrook.

The Sandhound's muscles flexed once, testing with lightning quickness the strength of the chains which ignominiously spread him at full length on the floor.

Clay Marybrook said slowly, "Smile if you wish, for the facial expression you now employ will be preserved intact for the next six months."

And his hand, glittering with crystal-glass rings, swung the Sandhound's bronzed *para*-wood cane, and released the crimson needle in which was located the paralyzing poison taken from the fangs of the desert animal.

The man who thus significantly swung the cane was large, block-jawed. He had the blooming complexion of one who goes to more than ordinary care to protect his health; his unblinking, depthless eyes indicated a capacity for single-track aggression that amounted to fanaticism.

The Sandhound did smile, with a cocky ruefulness. But from the moment of his awakening, he had been impressing on his mind his location, seeking out possible means of escape. He was lying full length on a deep rug, around him the luxurious furniture of a rich man's library, the smell of book-paper and expensive leather in his nostrils. There was one door, and one broad window which opened onto a balcony beyond which was to be seen only the faint glow of the city lights.

He murmured, at last, "You warned me to stay out of Satterfield, Marybrook, and I had the temerity to enter. I suppose you have a sort of moral right to use the cane, but be aware that I am not without friends who will—speculate. Particularly if they knew that I was investigating the murder of a sorogaster."

Some of the blood fled from Marybrook's pink face. His voice was low, strongly controlled. "You prove by your words that where I have been concerned you have never been up to much good.

On Earth you were my Nemesis, and as if not content with that, you exposed me when I fled to Jupiter City. Years ago," he said bitterly. "The memories remain. When I acquired the controlling interest in the Glass & Sand Corporation of Satterfield City, your influence with sorogasters caused them to strike and throw my combine into chaos. Fortunately, I took advantage of the law which enabled me to become, technically, a sorogaster—a pseudo-native of Mars; which made my extradition to Earth or Jupiter impossible. You remember the outcome?"

The Sandhound did remember. In its way, it was amusing. Clay Marybrook, in a desperate effort to keep his glass company solvent, appealed directly to Sser-Ssp, Grand Lama, in his way, of all the sorogasters of this section of Mars; had revealed by official papers that he was a sorogaster-in-law. Sser-Ssp had stopped the strike. And Clay Marybrook, triumphant, had issued to the Sandhound an ultimatum: *Don't return!*

Marybrook continued, his lips mocking hard: "And now, why do I preserve you, rather than use the power that is mine to throw you into some prison-asteroid? You know as well as I why you are in Satterfield—or perhaps you know more about my present venture than I guess. At any rate, in six months—perhaps a year—you will be harmless to me. Conscious, with your devilishly clever brain working full-blast, even in prison you could ruin me. So—"

The Sandhound, never one to give up hope until hope was truly gone, gravely considered the cane that Marybrook jabbed toward him—and gave himself up to the ignominy of being—preserved. He unconsciously flinched against momentary pain, the prick of the needle beneath his skin.

But there was no pain, for a voice spoke from the direction of the suddenly opened door.

"Drop that cane," said Bozo Dullard. "Drop it, Marybrook!"

**M**ARYBROOK'S lips worked flabbily. His shoulders sagged. The fine, healthy color went from his cheeks. He dropped the cane, then turned with an iron control already at work on his emotions.

"Who are you?" he grated. "How did you enter this house?"

"My name is Bozo," said Bozo, "and I came in the front door. Now, if you don't want me to burn a neat triangle right through you with this V-gun, you get to work on those chains. Chief," Bozo grinned, revealing his broken teeth, "I sure was sleeping, but I'm plenty wide-awake now."

The Sandhound nodded. "I thought this little disturbance might wake you up," he conceded dryly.

Marybrook numbly dropped to his knees. Locks clicked, and chains fell away. The Sandhound agilely leaped to his feet, swooped up his cane with heartfelt relief. But no sooner did he straighten than he knew the situation had taken another and almost comical turn. In the doorway behind Bozo stood the second intruder in the past sixty seconds. As the Sandhound's bemused eyes fastened on this person, she—for it was a girl—prodded Bozo forcefully with her gun, with deliberate intent to hurt, between the shoulder blades.

Bozo snarled in surprised rage.

"Drop your gun!" the girl snapped. Her whole body was mute indication of her aptitude with the small weapon she held, and of her willingness to use it. Bozo dropped the V-gun. Bozo ground his teeth and turned mournful eyes on the Sandhound.

"That telepathy business is the bunk," he said in a suffering tone. "You convince me I'm a telepath under special circumstances, chief, and then when I begin to rely on it, it throws me for a loss. I didn't know the Marybrook girl would be following right behind me."

The girl spoke briefly, coldly. "All right, dad. Pick up that gun. He's got it right. I did follow him into the house after he jumped the fence. Who are they?—house-breakers?"

"What else?" grunted Marybrook. He snatched up Bozo's gun, then searched Bozo in less conspicuous places.

The Sandhound, his hands in the air, made answer to Bozo, with a degree of bravado.

"You've been sleeping for the past week," he reminded. "Yet the minute I got into danger, you followed me here. How did you figure all that out?"

"Oh, *that*! That was just a hunch. It all came to me the minute I woke up. The way those sandies tricked you into that alley, for instance." He frowned, glanced uneasily at Marybrook. "I'll show you how I put two and two together some—"

The Sandhound laughed and turned his attention to father and daughter. Never immune to feminine beauty, his crescent eyebrows lifted in mute appreciation. He could admire determined lips and eyes set against a complexion akin to Earthly dawns, even when those lips and eyes favored him with total dislike. This girl was beautiful, beautiful with a perfection which confessed the careful and extensive use of cosmetics; but to start off with, she'd had a more than average base to build up from.

The Sandhound gave Marybrook no chance to speak, though Marybrook was half-master of the situation again.

"Very pleased to know you, Estrilda," he murmured politely, and at the raising of her eyebrows, he shrugged broad shoulders. "I've seen your picture," he admitted. "Some newspapers on Earth—sports in college, literary activities, so forth."

"You're hardly in a position to interest me with your knowledge," she said coldly. But her gun wavered a little. It was evident that she was scrutinizing him with added interest. The Sandhound noted now that there were dark circles under her eyes, a certain concealed desperation that tokened a problem she had to meet and solve. She started to speak, but stopped.

Marybrook made a sudden motion. He skirted behind Bozo Dullard, with the apparent intention of relieving his daughter of her weapon. With a quick motion she moved out in front of all three men. The fingers of her left hand waved her father down, with unmistakable command.

"No, you don't, dad," she said curtly. She pointed the gun squarely at him. "I'll hold the gun awhile. If everything's on the up and up you don't have to worry. In the meantime, I'm getting a good idea!"

SHE SAT down on the arm of a chair, smoothing her dress.

"But child—" Marybrook's face turned pleading—"don't act like this. I've done nothing to you. Give me the—"

"I wonder if you've done nothing to me," she glowered, her eyes fairly sparkling.

"Now you stay back. These men don't look like—"

"But these are thieves dressed up like honorables and misters—I!"

"So much the better, if they are," she smiled sweetly. "I could use some help from a couple of thieves, you know. Fight fire with fire, you know."

Marybrook paled, his fists knotting at his side. The malice in Estrilda's voice was unmistakable. And the Sandhound, never one to remain impassive when there was the shadow of a chance that he could shape events to his own liking, leaped into the conversational hiatus.

"Suppose you suggest what sort of help you need, Estrilda." The offer was made without pretension, without flippancy; indeed, it was made in such a manner that the girl's eyes widened with the hope that surged through her, as if another personality had entered her veins. She drew in her breath.

"I think you could help," she said, her eyes boring into those of the Sandhound. "I've generally been resourceful enough to handle my own affairs, but—well, this is something that beats me, in plain language." She added abruptly, "How do you stack up on kidnapping?"

"Estrilda!" Marybrook snapped.

"I want you to kidnap somebody for me," she insisted, almost with a note of hysteria. "I want you to kidnap a man named Paul Penny who lives in this city. He won't want to be kidnapped, but that's your problem. I want you to kidnap him and take him to the Moon, to see his brother, Morton Penny, the famous astronomer, and you send me the bill!"

The Sandhound considered her. "I can't promise that."

Her expression did not change. Then her lips set bitterly. "I was a fool to ask, of course. Never mind. I guess the police—"

Clay Marybrook's breath came noisily. "What about the police?"

"I used the 'phone before I followed this man up to the library. The police are on their way here now."

Clay Marybrook acted with terrifying urgency. He roared, leaped toward his daughter, with one blow struck the gun from her hand. It sailed away from her, and she watched stupidly, already robbed

of whatever fantastic hope she had.

The Sandhound was in action hardly later than Marybrook. It was evident to him, in a split second of cold reasoning, that Marybrook could not stand the intrusion of the police into his affairs at this moment nor at any moment in the next six months. Nor, the Sandhound thought with an inner grin, could he himself, for the Sandhound constantly trod that thin line which separates law and lawlessness, and whether or not he had stepped over was a matter that would not bear close investigation.

The back of Marybrook's head received the blow from the Sandhound's cane with a peculiar sodden sound. Marybrook fell, dropping like a piece of string and only then did his daughter come from her apparent trance.

She leaped toward the Sandhound. The Sandhound experienced a moment of heartfelt envy as Bozo Dullard reached out with overly long arms, grabbed her around the waist in such a manner that her own momentum swung her lithe body against his.

Bozo grinned joyfully, pivoted her in such a way that she spun three times like a pinwheel, her dress of sheer glass-silk fluffing up and down so that her bare legs were revealed.

Bozo held her for a few seconds head-down, and then draped her on the carpet. She lay there quietly, dizzied by the onrush of blood to her head.

"It works on chickens, too," Bozo said absently—absently, because his mind was suddenly busy with other thoughts. Alarm twitched the scarred expanse of his broad face. He jerked his thumb.

"The coppers just parked at the curb—they're on the way up," he said succinctly. "We better blow. Which way?"

"Front door, of course," the Sandhound muttered.

THE SANDHOUND was now busy with thoughts of his own, was moving with purposeful stride toward a desk in the corner. He jerked open one drawer so jam-packed with papers they spilled out onto the floor. He scooped up a handful, nerveless fingers sifting through them as an expert sharper would shuffle through a pack of cards. He paused now and then to read, his eyes showing his quickened



interest. Apparently, he found the information he sought, for now he stopped, stuffed the whole mess of papers back into the drawer.

His nostrils were dilating with the tenseness of the moment now, and he darted a silent command at Bozo Dullard.

They left Clay and Estrilda where they lay, departed by the open library door, went swiftly down a carpeted stairs, reached the reception hall below just as the front door began its insistent ringing. The Sandhound threw on every light.

It was now apparent to the Sandhound that Marybrook had dismissed his servants for that entire evening. The task he had been engaged in could not bear the risk of chance discovery.

The Sandhound arranged his clothing about him, smoothed down his hair, lighted a cigarette, and flung open the door.

A half-dozen darkishly clad police piled in. The Sandhound smiled breezily.

"I was wondering what was keeping you, gentlemen," he said with a slight lack of graciousness. "It may be murder."

"A murder?" said the foremost of the police, still blinking from the flood of lights which blinded him from every direction.

"Possibly," the Sandhound said ominously. "Possibly! You'll find the cause of the alarm in the first room at the top of the stairs."

His voice was so stern that the police went for the stairs in a body, with the grim attitude of men who will mete out justice, come what may. At this point, Bozo followed the Sandhound out the door. They had just passed through the fused quartz, fantastically carved gates of Clay Marybrook's mansion when somebody yelled from the house:

"Hey! Wait a minute. Who the hell are you?"

The Sandhound did not choose to remain to answer that question, even though a V-ray gun cracked thinly, sent its invisible flash of killing light along their trail.

As if impelled by a single thought, so closely did these two work, they leaped into the gyromobile the police had parked at the curbing. Its atomic motor was still running. The Sandhound laughed aloud as he started the single-wheeled vehicle off in high gear. They took off with a rush

that vibrated the air in the Sandhound's ears, completely unmindful of the ray-fire that spewed around them. They wheeled around a street intersection and lost themselves in a maze of side-streets.

The Sandhound soon straightened out to a course which Bozo did not question. Excitement, the very stuff of life to them, was beating high in their breasts, and they were working in that close harmony which before this had stood them in such good stead.

Bozo snapped his stumpy fingers in awe. "Morton Penny must be Paul Penny's brother—the same guy the Marybrook girl wanted us to kidnap!"



The Sandhound

## II

THE SANDHOUND nodded gravely. "What's the rest of the story? Why should Estrilda be in such a hysterical state of mind, so hysterical she was willing to give a couple of housebreakers a kidnapping job?"

The other man's eyes shone as he looked at his taller companion. "I make a guess," he muttered, "she could look at you and tell you weren't any housebreaker—not an ordinary housebreaker, anyway. That's your way, chief—excuse me for getting sentimental."



"Thanks, Bozo," the other said dryly. "Estrilda Marybrook isn't any ordinary lawbreaker herself. Her reason for wanting to kidnap Paul Penny is probably sinister . . . or—"

A frown of deepest thought appeared between his eyes, and his words dribbled away to nothingness. But his mind was working full blast. The Sandhound had not previously met Estrilda Marybrook, but he knew she had not seen her father a half-dozen times in the past dozen years. She was the product of an unhappy marriage, and Clay Marybrook, according to the Sandhound's devious sources of information, had shunted her off to a Terrestrial school at an early age.

Of Morton Penny, the Sandhound knew what was known to the average well-informed person. Morton Penny's passion was astronomy, and he had devoted his life to that science. His decade-old dream had been the building of a 500-in. telescope observatory. He had given his health, his money, and the prime years of his life to that ambition, enduring hardships such as only a true scientist could endure. He had sought the world over for financial backing, and apparently had at last found it. For last year he had started work on the construction of his observatory on the cold, airless satellite of Earth; and this year, according to the information the Sandhound had gleaned from Marybrook's private papers, had been additionally financed so that he could order the casting of the 500-in. mirror.

Not within Morton Penny's lifetime would this 500-in. reflector be put into full operation, but his ambition had been given its full impetus. No man could do more.

And yet, what sinister motives had also been given their impetus by the contract? Where did Estrilda Marybrook and Paul Penny fit into the jigsaw? And was it possible that the murder of a sorogaster Wednesday night—?

The Sandhound let his breath out slowly, and cleared his face. At least, there was a course of action he could follow at this moment. The gyromobile was skirting the heart of town, now above them the gleaming archway of the multi-lighted city-dome—the great, flattened-out glass roof of Satterfield, transparent here, admitting the

lights of myriads of stars; translucent there, dulling the celestial lights; and a mere reflecting surface elsewhere, mirror-bright. Around them rose the great, iridescent edifices which now and again pierced through the dome, supporting the dome's great weight, and providing the pent-house apartments above the city.

This was Satterfield City, throbbing with the life that is inherent in the human body itself.

"Anyway," the Sandhound mused, as he edged the stolen gyromobile farther and farther away from human habitations, toward where the Dome curved into the sand, "this is a matter that will have to be dug into deeply to extricate the truth. We're in the heart of danger, Bozo, and Clay Marybrook is the man to watch. One of the big men of Mars, he is; and we're maybe—a little small!"

"I don't think," said Bozo grimly, "I don't think we're *too* small. And Clay Marybrook won't be the first man to find it out."

The Sandhound's reply was grave. "I hope so, Bozo. I hope so."

**W**HATEVER his doubts as to the outcome of this adventure, the Sandhound's manner was the jaunty one of a man who finds the thin ice of danger exhilarating to test, but not to skate upon too incautiously. The streets were now little more than darkened alleys. The poor, the riff-raff of society, and the criminal element dwelt here. Dimly lighted barrooms, full of the sounds of false revelry, sped by, coming to a peak of sound and then dribbling into silence as the gyromobile passed them. And somehow they were past that thin dividing line, more imaginative than real, which separates the encircling settlement of sorogasters from their human opposites.

For sorogasters, being intelligent plants, were the opposites of humans, and by virtue of that contrast were able to live the symbiotic relationship of the plant and the animal.

Human beings breathed in oxygen, exhaled carbon dioxide; in sorogasters the process was reversed. On Mars, the sorogasters provided oxygen for humans, receiving their carbon dioxide in exchange. Also, human garbage, sewage, and wastes

of all kinds were routed to Sorogaster Town. This was their food, and the cities of Mars were automatically sanitized.

Neither Bozo's nor the Sandhound's noses wrinkled as the conical huts of the poorer sorogasters sped by. The smell of garbage was around them, like a vast dumpheap, but their knowledge of the conditions which gave rise to the odor, their scientific analysis of the situation, precluded any possibility of squeamishness.

In the darkest part of Sorogaster Town, the Sandhound leaped lightly from the car, and turned, his eyes probing Bozo's.

"You know what you're to do, eh?"

"I got a idea," Bozo answered cheerfully. He moved over behind the wheel. "Be seeing you, chief." The gyromobile moved off.

A smile was tugging at the corner of the Sandhound's lips, now, and he moved along with the litheness of the desert animal whose name he had taken. And, indeed, the Sandhound was in his chosen profession, hunting down those human rats who prey on human souls and liberties and care nothing for the progress of man unless it has to do with the fattening of their own purses. Clay Marybrook was such a rat as the Sandhound pursued, and his downfall was the goal the Sandhound had set for himself.

The streets were empty at first, but the Sandhound went into his dance, like some grotesque character of the ballet caught between grief and exaltation. His feet barely lifted from the surface of the street, yet they tapped out an insistent message. This was but a clumsy rendition of the 'gaster language, but it was caught up in the feet of the 'gasters who lurked in the shadows. They crowded around him, recognizing him at last as a friend of their people.

The Sandhound tired of his "speech," and now stood motionless. At last a lane opened in the crowd of sorogasters, and one who was apparently of authority beckoned to him with his arm-root. The Sandhound followed.

He would never know what route he followed to the underground abode of Sser-Ssp, Grand Lama of the sorogasters of this vicinity of Mars. Indeed, no one would ever try to find out where the Grand Lama, so-called by man, actually dwelt—

in, under, or outside the city. For such was the industrial power of 'gasters that humans were in constant, almost comical fear that they would strike, and the glass industries on Mars lie idle.

THE SMELLS that accosted the Sandhound now might have been classed as aromas by the natives. The Sandhound tried to make his nose and his mind by-pass them, but it is doubtful if he was successful. There was a muscular twitching in his throat, a growing dryness, which made him doubt the strength of his stomach. However, he had gone through this twice before in other cities, and he should be able to go through it again.

However smelly the route, there was no lack of lights. It was apparently feeding time. Ultra-violet ray and sun-lamps sprinkled these smooth, hard-wood corridors. The walls of the corridors boasted the weirdest sort of paintings, and always the Sun, Giver of Life, was predominant in them.

The Sandhound and his guide were halted now by an opaque door of glass which ran with deeply ingrained streaks of ferrous oxide—rust. Up to this point the Sandhound had not been spoken to, principally because no human would ever become adept at understanding the speech of a sorogaster.

Sorogasters had "ears" and "voices" in the soles of their splayed, vegetable feet; humans did not.

The 'gaster danced slowly, his eyes, in the middle of his body, holding the Sandhound's.

"I will leave you then. You have but to open the door, and a servant will supply you with a sounding-board with which you can more easily understand our ruler. Good symbiosis, friend."

The Sandhound was left alone. He was never one to put off a meeting even with that which was odorous, however, and so he opened the door. The distilled garbage odors of sorogaster cooking which now struck him were beyond anything Earthly. The Sandhound's inherent dignity, which he would not have lost for this nor any other world, was all that saved him from ignominy. He advanced, into the room, under an iron control.

There were five 'gasters sitting around

*Estrilda*

the table—reclining on benches in such a way that they could place their inhuman food in the tops of their “heads”—stomachs, really. They came erect as he entered, their large eyes ogling him. Two were adults, three were much younger and smaller.

The Sandhound recognized Sser-Ssp, for he was by far the oldest. The roots which draped from his body had shrunk to dryness—his skin was wrinkled finely, skin which seemed as dry and ready to come off as the peeling of an onion. Horny vegetable bumps encircled his eyes. ‘Gasters were shaped much as a human—they had arms, legs, “heads,” “torsos;” but the resemblance was not an indication of the truth.

A servant, young and “rootful,” placed a hard-wood sounding-board near the Sandhound. He at once mounted it and tapped out his greeting: “May we continue in the best of harmony, O Sser-Ssp!”

**S**SER-SSP arose with a parchment creaking. A few feet of his loose skin fell off when he returned the Sandhound’s greeting, but after that he remained intact.

“Greetings, you who call yourself the Sandhound,” he said courteously. His just-visible eyes had with age acquired their

ability to register human emotions. There was in them a great respect and even affection. “You have honored me, and therefore I will answer your questions quickly, for I understand your discomfort.”

“And my questions,” said the Sandhound, smiling that smile which had made him numberless friends, “will be brief and pointed, that I may not keep you too long from your meal. First, is it your understanding that the murder of a sorogaster by a human is considered a more heinous deed by humans than the murder of a human by a human?”

It is possible that Sser-Ssp’s eyes smiled.

He answered, the rapid vibrations being picked up by the Sandhound from the sounding-board on which he stood.

“The question has its serious as well as its comical connotations. When humans first came to Mars, there was the wholesale killing and enslaving of sorogasters. Sorogasters therefore retreated deep into the deserts, refusing to unite in any kind of mutually profitable symbiosis with humans.

“Humans built cities, but found that without sorogaster help, and without sorogaster-human symbiotic relationships, human colonization of Mars was impossible. Therefore laws were passed in which sorogasters were given equal rights with humans, and these laws implied strongly that sorogasters were of equal or greater intelligence than humans. Technically, to kill a sorogaster, is exactly the same as killing a human. The precedents in all law courts, however, prove that the murder of a sorogaster—no matter what the reason for the murder might be—is punished more strongly. This arises, of course, because without sorogasters the glass factories of man would be inoperable. Humans bend over backward to please sorogasters.”

This was not so much a frank admission as it was a sardonic probe with humorous overtones. The Sandhound kept his wry smile back. He got his feet busy again, tapping out his laborious speech.

“Three days ago, a sorogaster was found just outside this city with a lead bullet through his calyx. It was proved he was killed by a human.

“The humans of this city, afraid of a ‘gaster strike, demanded the immediate ap-

prehension of the murderer. Editorials had the murder as their subject matter. The police went to all lengths, trying to track down clues. And yet—"the Sandhound's eyes sharpened and glittered on Sser-Ssp's"—and yet, the sorogaster population of Satterfield City not only did not threaten to strike, but never gave any indication that it knew about the murder."

He paused for emphasis; then—"why?"

From the moment the Sandhound began to speak, a retreating expression grew in Sser-Ssp's eyes; grew until it was almost a total retreat of body and mind. His eyes grew to narrow slits. He was closing his thoughts off as completely as if he had been miles away.

The Sandhound noticed that, and before the breach, closing rapidly, could disappear entirely, he drove an uncivil, completely unmannered conversational wedge into it.

"For some reason, sire," he shot out scornfully, "you're afraid to talk about that!"

A tenseness, quivering over the little group of seated 'gasters, left them suddenly rigid, eyes turned away. But the man who faced them saw the sickly fear that had been in those eyes. Sser-Ssp's eyes alone faced the Sandhound, and the emotion that the Sandhound saw there was one of ravaging, soul-eating horror, pulsing deep in his brain.

But at last Sser-Ssp spoke, and so faint and unwilling were the vibrations that the Sandhound was not sure he had heard aright.

"That sorogaster," said Sser-Ssp, "was not as we. And there are many others, like him."

The Sandhound blinked. And before he could stop the ancient 'gaster, the interview was over.

"May our symbiosis continue," said the patriarch, and sat down with the same creaking that had attended his rising.

The Sandhound had a sensation of defeat. In the face of all the rules, his impulse was to tap out another question—but he stopped his feet in time, politely vibrated, "Good harmony, sire," turned and left.

He walked fast now, his stomach cramped from the odors, his mind a maelstrom of thought. His guide was waiting.

### III

FIFTEEN minutes later, he stood in the dark streets, frown-lines drawn tight between his eyes, in his fingers a lighted cigarette. For one of the few times in his life, the Sandhound was thrown off balance, caught unprepared, defeated by a personality which lived in a shell of custom. What course of action now? What was he fighting? What monstrous unfairness, connected with a billion-dollar telescope, was Clay Marybrook perpetrating? The Sandhound flicked his cigarette away hardly smoked, and with grim steps started toward the center of the city.

One thing he knew: Much of this mystery began and ended in Paul Penny, brother of the astronomer.

The Sandhound admittedly had none of those powers of perception which were the unrealized gift of Bozo Dullard, and yet, as he propelled himself at urgent speed through Sorogaster Town and was within the very glow of the first dimly lighted street of the human section of the city, something made him stop, tingling. That something may have been but the breath of a subtle perfume, overriding thick garbage odors and touching but barely at the Sandhound's consciousness. Under such guises clairvoyance often hides itself. Be that as it may, he suddenly doubled in his tracks, darted under a moldy archway and into a square formed by three dead-end streets coming together.

The Sandhound drew back, perhaps too late. Whether or not Estrilda Marybrook had seen him was a problem. If she did, she gave no sign of it. The Sandhound himself could see her but briefly in the dim glow-lamp on the corner. She was holding about her trim, erect figure a dark cape as protection against the slight chill of the night. As the Sandhound came into the square, she was dancing the speech-dance of the sorogasters, for there were sorogasters facing her and listening. Her rendition was not skilful, and looked as if it might be the result of Sorogaster Communication II, as taught in the classroom of some Tellurian university. But it was evident that she was just now concluding a bargain, for now she placed something in a sorogaster's outstretched hand.

In another instant, the sorogasters were gone.

Estrilda Marybrook herself turned quickly, walked toward the human section of town as if with a purpose. The Sandhound, frowning, followed. She had been too far away for him to feel the vibrations of her "speech."

He followed her for a block, wary as always of his surroundings, his senses highly attuned to any sudden occurrence.

And she turned, as he half suspected she would, without warning. Her weapon was in her hand, and a faint arc of light lanced toward the Sandhound. He had already stepped from the line of fire, and now, as she cried,

"Get back, whoever you are!" he darted agilely forward. He wrapped one powerful hand around her wrist, forced the gun out of her hand. She turned into a sinuous, screaming bundle of human tissue. She kicked, gouged, and piercingly woke the night with the most unholy sounds ever to assail the Sandhound's sensitive ears; his lips curled with a cold, impatient savagery as he drew her to her feet.

"Listen to me, you little fool," he bit out. "You're making things harder for yourself."

She stopped her activities only momentarily as she recognized him. She kicked him in the shin and screamed again. The Sandhound let her go suddenly and she landed in a sitting position in the street. They were just on the borderline of Sorogaster Town, and a half dozen men were running toward the scene of the disturbance—rough, bearded, perhaps drunken men; but it was evident to the Sandhound that they were coming to save a damsel in distress. He swore like a foiled villain, and vaulted a fence. And ten minutes later, as he settled back against the syntholeather of a gyro-taxi, he was still fuming impotently. But suddenly the full picture came to him, and he laughed so abruptly that the cab-driver turned around. And until he got off at a radiophone booth soon after, bidding the driver to wait for him, a wry smile creased his face.

**P**AUL PENNY did have an address in Satterfield City, one of the pent-house apartments formed by the projection of one of those tall, apartment hotels through

the glass roof of the city. The Sandhound whistled. Penny was evidently not without private means, unlike his brother. These pent-house apartments were generally expensive, being provided with landing platforms for autogyros suited to Mars' thin atmosphere; and, being hermetically sealed in order to retain a normal Earth air pressure, were fitted with automatically operated air-locks.

The Sandhound pressed out Paul Penny's number on the calling-pad. He switched in the audio only.

A voice answered. "Okay, chief," said Bozo. "You can come on up and make it snappy. I'm wide awake, and I got a hunch something's going to break and it ain't so good for us." His voice was worried, urgent.

The Sandhound said briefly, "Hold on," and hung up. And thirty minutes later, after a ride through the heart of the traffic-jammed city, he was taking a Dip-Down car to the below-city throat of one of the largest of Satterfield's apartment hotels. He shot skyward and seconds later Bozo admitted him into a cool, simply furnished three-room apartment. Bozo closed the door quickly, for he was holding a gun on Paul Penny.

"This shift," said Bozo, his eyes lidded, "won't talk."

The Sandhound took a stance in front of Paul Penny. He lighted a cigarette. He said coldly, "Talk, Penny. Every second you sit there draped over that chair and keeping your thoughts to yourself brings Marybrook that much closer to us."

The unlit cigarette that dangled from Penny's sullen lips bobbed a little, the only indication that the Sandhound's words might have had some effect. The insolent vagueness stayed on in his brown eyes. His tall, raw-boned figure remained laconically at ease.

"Don't hand me that," his lips said, barely moving. "You're Marybrook's men. Here I sit. Here I stay. I'll stick to my rights and—fight for them."

The Sandhound said with an edge of steel in his voice, "Maybe we're trying to protect not only your rights but the rights of most people at large. Why don't you try to leave Mars, Penny?—and talk with your brother Morton?"

Pain skyrocketed into Penny's eyes, a



shuddering agony. It quickly disappeared. His lips clamped.

"It won't do you any good to sit there like a clam," the Sandhound said. "Because, y'know, I can talk, even if you can't. For instance, the other night you killed a sorogaster."

Penny's expression turned frigid. "Your friend Marybrook let you in on that, of course."

"My friend Penny let me in on that just now," the Sandhound averred.

"Nuts," said Paul Penny, but his face was turning red. He struggled along on his own accusation. "Well, anyway, I know now you aren't the police, because Marybrook said he wouldn't tell the police if I didn't—" He stopped, cast his eyes down. The Sandhound smiled to himself. Penny was losing his hold on himself. If they were given enough time—

During this conversation, Bozo Dullard had been walking around the room. The Sandhound, watching him from the corner of his eye, saw that Bozo's anxiety was increasing by the second.

"What is it?" The Sandhound's query came sharply in the abnormal, pregnant quiet that seemed to have come over the room.

Bozo didn't answer. He walked to a closed door—probably that leading to a bedroom or kitchen. He continued to keep his gun on Penny, but he opened the door a crack.

A crack was enough. As if an explosive charge had been set off behind the door it slammed open, and Bozo was sent bowling backward.

Six sorogasters, recently come from the desert, to judge by the streaks of ferrous oxide on their vegetable skins, pushed into the room and without preamble hurled themselves at the three humans.

Penny was on his feet.

"At 'em!" he yelled. He was knocked back against the wall.

A SOROGASTER started toward the Sandhound, and the Sandhound felt a shock-wave cross his brain. For one second he understood the pulsing horror that had stood naked on Sser-Sssp's face, for that horror touched him now. This was, he knew, the same sorogaster that Estrilda Marybrook, an hour before, had spoken to

on the edge of Sorogaster Town. But it was not that which repelled him. It was what he saw in the eyes of these sorogasters. Not insanity, but something that was evil, unhealthy. This mind was actively evil, and possessed the un-sorogaster-like emotion of avarice.

Sorogasters were plants and possessed—or should possess—plant natures, apathy and passiveness foremost among all characteristics. Sorogasters had before this been known to do illegal tasks for humans, but only from a passive standpoint. These sorogasters—the truth was sharp—were working with a will of their own, as if they had much to gain, and were ready to kill for it.

The words of Sser-Ssp exploded across the Sandhound's brain.

"That sorogaster was not as we. And there are many others."

The Sandhound's cigarette dropped from his suddenly nerveless fingers. A fierce smile transformed his features. He grabbed at the attacking sorogaster, caught a fistful of roots at that portion of the body which was most painful. He twirled the sorogaster, got him into the air with the same motion, and let go. The sorogaster smashed into the sorogasters who had crowded Bozo Dullard into a corner.

Paul Penny was still erect, but he had got started off on the wrong foot, for a 'gaster kicked him in the jaw. Penny reeled and fell, blood coming from his jaw. Three of the 'gasters concentrated on the Sandhound—three on Bozo. The Sandhound saw the desperate mad snarl on Bozo Dullard's ruined face. The Sandhound himself went down under a rush of garbage-smelling plants—not garbage at that, he thought in his last conscious moment, but probably desert carrion—and then he clearly saw a 'gaster draw his leg-stalk back and kick him. The Sandhound's mind sank inkily . . .

THE SANDHOUND stirred. Tiredness drugged him. He was no longer in Satterfield City, he knew, because he was experiencing a slight oxygen starvation, which explained the tiredness. As if to admit audibly the truth of this surmise, he now heard the labored choke of a portable pressure-builder, somewhere near. Its mechanism must be deficient.

He came to his feet. Bozo and Penny were still unconscious, and he let them lie. He felt a quick interest in his surroundings. Beneath him the floor was unbroken glass, the color of beer bottles, and the granular sand of the red desert could be seen through it vaguely. Around him were the walls of a solid spherical-triangular glass hut. At one place in the ceiling the glass was transparent and the noon-day sky was visible. There were also three windows in the walls. The Sandhound stared through.

Beyond this hermetically sealed prison were other glass igloos of varying shapes. This was clearly a desert settlement, not very recently shaped out of the sands by the acid secretions that make 'gasters irreplaceable glass-workers. Sorogasters—and they were the same repulsive breed that had made the attack—walked the streets, paying no attention to their captives. Here and there some sorogasters had squatted down, rooting themselves to sparse spots of vegetation.

And, almost an anachronism, toward the end of the village a medium-sized autogyro rested on a platform.

The Sandhound marveled. He was acquainted with the hopeless red deserts as few ever have been, and yet this settlement, peopled with a strange, rapacious type of 'gaster, had escaped him. Still, much of the answer had already come to him.

Paul Penny, blood caked on his jaw, at last awoke, coming to his feet wild-eyed. The Sandhound leaned against the curving wall and smiled. Penny relaxed and jerked a thumb at Bozo.

The Sandhound shrugged. "Let him sleep. He needs it as few men do. When he wakes up, you and I can begin to worry."

Penny didn't understand that, but he let it pass. He drew a deep breath. "Maybe I misjudged you. You're not with Marybrook?"

The Sandhound admitted he wasn't. "Less even than you."

"And what will Marybrook do with us now that he's got us?"

"Keep us," said the Sandhound, "until he's completed whatever rotten job he's engaged in."

Penny's lips set glumly, and a hard stoniness came to his eyes. "Of course,"

he muttered. "We're here until he's finished casting Morton's telescope mirror. When the contract's completed, Marybrook can let us go, because what I—what we know won't hurt him then. Everything will be perfectly fine then. I'll escape the charge of murdering a sorogaster, and—" His lips curled in livid self-contempt. "—Morton will want to die because eventually he'll have to find out that all the work he's put into his ambition, all the years of misery and bad health, were—useless; vain."

"Maybe," the Sandhound suggested, "you didn't kill a sorogaster."

"I murdered a sorogaster all right," Penny said grimly. "You can't soften that. The sorogaster came to my apartment that night and tried to murder me and make off with the plans. I got him first and I dumped him into my autogyro and left him outside the city. You know self-protection isn't a plea where a sorogaster is concerned, don't you? Technically it is; actually, it doesn't improve your case a damn. You fry, anyway."

THE SANDHOUND pointed. "Maybe it was one of those sorogasters out there—one that used to live here."

"What's the difference? They're still sorogasters, aren't they?" He fell into a brooding silence. "If I knew what Estrilda was doing—what she thought of me—" His voice lapsed.

The Sandhound studied him with narrowed eyes: It was suddenly plain that Penny was in love with Estrilda—but was she in love with him? It was plainly impossible.

The Sandhound sauntered across the width of the narrow prison, head down in thought.

He said, cocking a watchful eye at Penny, "Naturally, you realize it was Estrilda Marybrook who hired those sorogasters to waste in on us back there in your apartment?"

Paul Penny's head came up, his face suddenly wrathful. "That's not true!" he roared, almost throwing himself at the Sandhound.

The Sandhound stood and waited calmly. As calmly, he explained the business he had seen Estrilda engaged in the night before. Penny's face turned haggard.

"She's turned against me," he choked. "She told me I was a coward for not going to Earth's Moon and telling her father to go to hell. Now she's thrown in with her father!"

The Sandhound held his eyes with sudden demand. "Suppose you explain a few things instead of throwing out tid-bits, Penny. For instance, those plans you mentioned—the plans for what?"

"Oh!" Penny ran his fingers comb-fashion through his disheveled hair and looked shamed-faced for having lost control. "I haven't got the plans—burnt 'em up. But I carry a toy model around with me—here, I'll show you. You'll agree with me I've got something. I started work on this five years ago out Jupiter-way after I fell heir to a small fortune from a miner I grub-staked."

HE STRIPPED off his shirt. Around his stomach wires were wound; there were three flat, thin storage cells, as well as a paper-thin rheostat control arrangement, taped tightly to his skin. From his pockets he brought three electrodes which looked like innocuous copper nails.

The attention of both men was suddenly diverted. Bozo awoke, shaking and sweating and blubbering. "Chief," he gasped. "Where the—"

He staggered with a wild, lurching gait toward that window which gave vision off across an endlessly clear desert.

Bozo's enormous chest rose and fell in great panting motions; he was still half asleep.

"He's coming," Bozo panted. "Over there under the horizon, on a sand-tractor. Marybrook. Oh-h-h-h . . ." His voice dribbled away and he went reeling toward the far side of the hut and slid to the floor, his face in his hands. Suddenly he looked up, all the wildness gone from his scarred face. He looked bewildered. Suddenly he was on his feet.

"Chief," he said uneasily, "Something's wrong!"

Penny finished. His electrodes were rooted to the floor with rubber suction disks, his storage cells were hooked in series, and a veritable maze of uninsulated wire made the miscellany of tiny tubes, condensers, and rheostats into one complete unit.



Marybrook

He held his tiny instrument board in the palm of his hand. He moved a pointer, turned the control knob. And at a height equal to the instrument panel a darkish swirling grew in the air. It cleared and the Sandhound's breath stopped as he saw what he was looking at.

Bozo's breath sounded in awe. "A telescope lens!" he blurted. A great light dawned in his eyes. "Hey! I'm beginning to see—"

Penny glanced up, pride in his face. "It's a lens—but not glass. It's made out of air! And a field of static electricity holds it together—compresses it into the shape of a lens. A weightless lens. No distortion. Weight was the big trouble with the old refractor type telescope. That's why they began making reflectors—like the old two hundred-incher. But weight begins to tell even in a reflector. My brother is building his big reflector on the Moon for that reason—partly that reason—" His face grayed. "Anyway, you can see how my brother's going to feel when he finds out you can make a five hundred inch telescope just by pressing a button!"

The Sandhound made an almost imperceptible commanding motion.

Penny said, "Oh," and brought the second air-lens into being, to make a focus

possible. He moved the two lenses about in relation to each other until the far horizon ballooned up and up to tremendous detail. All three men were standing behind the second lens. Penny now created his eye-piece, holding the three lenses in alignment by the motion of the instrument panel cupped in his hand.

He dropped to his knees, put his eyes to the eyepiece.

#### IV

THE LENSES, grew and decreased in size, moved away from each other and finally became stationary. Penny's manner suddenly indicated excitement, and he beckoned the Sandhound. The Sandhound looked, and his face turned grim. Marybrook was truly on the way, perhaps two miles off. He was sitting in the open cab of a sand-tractor beside his driver. Both men were clad in air-suits. Marybrook's face was passive with the relaxed look of a man who has solved a problem. He held a vibro-gun across his knees.

The top of the tractor was covered with sorogasters, as if Marybrook had picked up a load of native hitch-hikers. The tractor was jolting from side to side, plowing up and down sand-dunes, sometimes invisible to sight, leaving a streaming wake of sand-dust behind it.

Penny straightened, pressed a button. The "telescope" disappeared without trace of its existence.

"What will he do with us?" Penny jerked out.

The Sandhound explained about the cane. Then his eyes widened. An ejaculation whispered between his lips, and he was across their glass prison, peering out the farther window.

"Perhaps," he said casually, "we won't have to worry about Marybrook after all."

Penny and Bozo came crowding; and the scene the three men witnessed was electrifying.

"Estrilda!"

The cry erupted from Penny's lips. And it was truly Estrilda Marybrook, clad in a pressure suit complete with "aquarium"—or glass helmet.

"But what—" Penny blurted helplessly. "She was—"

"Wait!" It was the Sandhound who spoke, in grim pleasure. "I think we'll find, Penny, that Estrilda Marybrook has either had a change of heart or else never played turncoat in the first place." He pointed. "That package she's carrying over her shoulders may be air-suits for us to escape in."

Estrilda Marybrook was swamped on all sides by crowds of 'gasters. The Sandhound heard the sounds they made—tropisms—and saw the rapid vibration of their splayed feet as they communicated their excitement to their fellows. More came running.

Penny was in a fever of nerves. "But what's she doing?" he cried. "What's she giving them?"

The Sandhound's eyes glittered. "Colchicine," he made answer. "This is a village of colchicine eaters."

"Colchi—" Penny's ejaculation dribbled away and he shook his head helplessly.

But Bozo understood. "Man! She'd better hustle it up, chief. Marybrook'll get here in fifteen minutes easy."

Estrilda's plan grew clear as she proceeded. The 'gasters grabbed the little white packages tied with red string greedily. One package was enough for the greediest, apparently, for after swallowing the contents they went reeling away. Three-quarters of the entire population—sixty perhaps—were disposed of. Estrilda withheld the rest of her supply of the drug, and the tropisms given off by the plants grew menacing.

Penny involuntarily cried her name.

"Estrilda!" Then he snarled savagely, "They're going to force it from her! Why in Heaven's name did she ever come here!"

"Damn good thing she did," Bozo said tensely. "Marybrook'll be here in a few minutes, and if he gets here before she gets us out of here—"

Estrilda had heard Penny's cry, apparently, but she paid no attention. There was an urgent expression on her face as she imperatively demanded something of the 'gasters by pointing to the hut. It was evident that she was promising them colchicine if they freed the humans. And suddenly the sorogasters capitulated!

They worked with the unity of ants. They came toward the hut. They scooped up sand in their arm-roots, and it amaz-

ingly turned to malleable glass. Then they went to work and built a glass "blister" onto the side of the glass-hut. One took the package of air-suits from Estrilda. He crawled into the blister, and it was sealed shut behind him. Then he sprayed acids on the outer wall of the hut and made a hole. The "blister" was an air-lock.

THE SANDHOUND grabbed the package from the Martian native, ripped it open. He tossed air-suits at the other two men.

"On with 'em, quick!" he clipped out. "Marybrook is just beyond that next rise."

He suddenly grabbed Penny by the arm. Penny was starting to dismantle the equipment of his amazing electrically formed telescope, and was wrapping it around his body.

"Leave that outside your air-suit," the Sandhound commanded in an iron voice.

"But—but why? If Marybrook catches up with us, he'll have to dig beneath my suit to get the model—"

"Leave it out," the Sandhound snapped. The look in his eyes was grim. "That little gadget might be able to do us a little good later on—but not as a telescope."

Penny wordlessly obeyed. In a few moments, the men were garbed. Their humidity and air regulators were adjusted. The air pressure was building up to 12 pounds to the square inch. They screwed on their "aquarium"—these were made of rubber-glass, and when they expanded looked no different from glass helmets.

The sorogaster saw that they were ready. He "ate" a hole through the wall of the hut, and the men burst through onto the desert.

Estrilda came flying toward them, her face white and pinched. She grabbed Penny's gauntleted hand, looking at him desperately for a brief moment. Penny's face turned soft.

"Estrilda," he murmured, but she cut him off and turned to the Sandhound. She was plainly terrified, but through her terror showed her consummate relief at having released the three men. The reason for her terror was evident. The sorogasters were crowding around the humans, their attitude menacing.

"We can't trust these sorogasters," she

jerked out. "They aren't like other sorogasters. They're treacherous—they'll kill us after they get all the colchicine; or hold us until my—my father gets here."

"Steady," the Sandhound snapped. He took the remainder of the packets of colchicine from her. "You came in a sand-tractor?"

She barely nodded her head, and he made a commanding motion. Estrilda grabbed Penny's gauntleted hand, started walking quickly toward the far end of the 'gaster village. Bozo followed after, the Sandhound bringing up the rear.

The sorogasters continued to circle them, moving about them, crowding. In spite of this, they made some progress. It was only when the sand-tractor came into sight a little beyond the village, that the sorogasters at last realized that they were being tricked. The tropisms they were making swelled menacingly, and the 'gasters pressed in a close circle around the humans.

Estrilda halted, petrified, her eyes big and wide.

"Impasse," Penny muttered into the stillness. His face was sweating.

The Sandhound's lips showed grimness.

He tossed a package of colchicine onto the desert floor ten feet away. The 'gasters went into a mad scramble as they dove for the drug. The humans made more headway before they were again stopped. This time the Sandhound tossed two packages in divergent directions, farther away, and again they gained respite. Now the Sandhound deliberately hung back, gaining only a few feet, but allowing Estrilda, Penny and Bozo to make the sandtractor. The motor roared into life, but the Sandhound was far from safety. In a last desperate try, he scattered the remainder of the colchicine over a wide arc, then turned and ran toward the sandtractor.

"Chief!" Bozo yelled. He made a flying leap through the air, landed square on the back of a 'gaster who was racing after the Sandhound.

THE SANDHOUND kicked out, sent another 'gaster reeling backward. He leaped aboard the tractor, even as Estrilda shoved the atomic-motor into low. He whirled, grabbed Bozo's outstretched hand and yanked him aboard. The tractor took



off with a grind and roar, and in seconds was traveling on fourth gear.

"Made it!" Penny grinned in high-glee, thumbing his nose backward. But the Sandhound's expression of tensity did not change.

"But we've got something far worse on our trail. Marybrook!"

It was true. As they topped a sand-dune, they saw Marybrook's tractor come thundering through the village. Marybrook didn't even stop. He had already gathered the main facts—namely, that his quarry were escaping.

"Get down into the cab," the Sandhound commanded Penny and Bozo. He lightly dropped into the front seat, beside Estrilda Marybrook. She tossed him a glance, her face pallid.

"Don't think you three are immune because I'm in the tractor," she jerked out. "My father will shoot to kill. I haven't seen him a half-dozen times in my life, and he's always hated me just the same as he hated my mother. He'll destroy anything that stands in his way. We stand in the way of his casting the huge telescope for Paul's brother and so he'll destroy us."

Paul was twisted around in his seat. "The rat," he scowled darkly.

Marybrook's tractor was coming after them, kicking up sand behind it. Even as the three men watched it, the sorogasters riding on the top jumped off, sprawled on the desert floor. The tractor seemed fairly to leap closer.

"We ain't going fast enough," Bozo said speculatively. "Maybe if we got into the super-drive—"

"No super-drive," Estrilda said curtly, bitterly. "Not while the Sun is up. Atomic lining of the fuel intake needs overhauling. It's one of those things. I guess we're fools to try to make Belleville."

"Maybe," said Bozo, grinning at the Sandhound, "we ought to try that trick we pulled out Pluto-way, chief, when the drug-syndicate boys were chasing us down Oxygen creek. Jump in front of our tractor, get squashed down into the sand, time ourselves and come up behind Marybrook!"

The Sandhound's eyes crinkled in reminiscence. "Sand doesn't squash like oxygen-snow," he remarked.

The Sandhound squinted up at the sky

with thoughtful eyes. The Sun, well-smothered by clouds, was about to set. With the chill of night coming on, the atomic lining of the fuel intake was already gaining in efficiency. And as the dusk deepened, two sand-tractors, one the pursued, one the pursuer, flung themselves at top speed across the desert floor.

WHEN the Sun sank, a soft darkness settled across the world—a darkness but little relieved by the faint light of Deimos and Phobos, those hurtling moons whose magic beauty had played such a prominent part in the fictional writings of famous, but long-forgotten writers, of a Mars-that-never-was. The desert dipped and dived away, as creamy as a beautiful woman's skin. Here and there were the weird plants of Mars, deriving their bare nourishment from the ferrous-oxide sands. The Sandhound breathed deeply of the night, as he breathed deeply of every other experience, comfortable or not, and he studied the desert which was as much his home as any other place could be. Now and again, the tractor crushed across those early progenitors of the sorogasters—strikingly human-like plants which were forever rooted to one spot in the sand, their arms hanging now, but during the day following the Sun in day-long worship. Now and again, he saw Earthly plants—the century-plant, the ocotillo, the Spanish bayonet, and Joshua tree.

The four rode in silence, Estrilda handling the tractor with the skill only an Earth-bred person can acquire. She took advantage of every undulation, every dip, every swale, riding a ridge with full fury, leaping the tractor off into space from the top of a dune with such apparent rashness that Paul Penny was in a state of quaking nerves.

"Ye Gods!" he cried, more than half seriously. "If we tip over, all this hurry won't help."

"And if we don't tip," Estrilda retorted, "We're that much nearer Belleville, and a lot closer to a ripe old age."

"I don't think," Penny said glumly, "that anything you do will get us to Belleville a respectable distance ahead of your father. By sunrise we'll be eight or nine miles distant. We won't even hit a road until we're a half mile from the city. And

when the Sun comes up, we'll start losing speed. If we had a long-range gun—"

"We don't," Estrilda said curtly.

But Marybrook did, the Sandhound knew. He rose in his seat now and then, and hardened though he was to the evil of man, the sight of Marybrook standing up in the cab of his roaring tractor, hunched over a long-range vibro-gun, ready to fire the minute he might come near enough, was enough to make him shudder. Still, it was apparent that Marybrook would never get close enough tonight to use his weapon. When the Sun, rose, now—

A slow, secret smile tugged at the Sandhound's lips. The Sun, giver of life, could also be—the taker!

BOZO WAS asleep, snoring gently. And the Sandhound again gave himself over to an appreciation of the Martian night, cupping the back of his head in his locked palms. The tractor flung itself on through a ghostly world, dipping up and down those great pink dunes which in this light gave the desert the appearance of a vast, stormy sea that had suddenly been frozen motionless. The sounds of crackling cactus ascended to a sky that was powdered with stars. There was here, if one could but seek it out, a vast peace, and sometimes it seemed that the only normalcy one could find lay in this endless stretch of wasteland, where human foot had hardly touched.

The night, equal in length to that of Earth, wore on. The Sandhound twice took over the driver's seat, but with the coming of dawn, the dreaded hour, made sure that Estrilda had the wheel.

The Sun stood out in the east, now, white and hot, unfiltered by a thick atmosphere. The three men, imbued with a common tenseness, were standing up in the tractor, staring back at Marybrook. They could see Marybrook, and there was no doubt he saw them. He was on his feet, too, a pressure-suited figure, the metallic parts of his suit and the glass of his "aquarium" cascading in molten reflection the Sun's hot rays.

Marybrook swung the vibro-gun with a vicious motion.

"Duck!" said Bozo. But he himself didn't duck, and neither did the Sand-

hound. When Bozo went down, the Sandhound knew, then it would mean that Marybrook was about to fire.

The Sandhound noted with frowning eyes that the distance between the two tractors was lessening. The atomic lining was absorbing heat from the Sun so fast that it couldn't channel atomic energy into the motor.

"He's gonna fire," came Bozo's voice softly. His scarred face grimaced in a comical tenseness.

"Sharp!" the Sandhound suddenly shouted at Estrilda. "Turn fast! Around that sand dune!"

Estrilda reacted to that sudden command far faster than if her own motor nerves had received the order from her own brain. She flung the wheel over and the tractor spewed around in a close circle. Too late! Marybrook visibly depressed the trigger-button just as the tractor might have reached possible protection. A burst of smoke exploded from the engine hood, and Estrilda tried to cramp the wheel and save the tractor. It was impossible. Slowly, like a sorely wounded animal, the tractor lifted up, started to roll over on its side and down the slope.

The Sandhound yelled, caught Bozo and flung him through the air so that he struck the sand away from the path the tractor was taking. The motion flung the Sandhound off balance, threw a cloud of sand spurting up, sent him sailing head over heels through the air.

He came to, helmet buried deeply in the sand. He rolled on his side, immediately saw the terrifying sight of Marybrook and his driver advancing toward the scene, Marybrook holding his detached vibro-gun at his hip, ready to fire. And the expression on Marybrook's face was almost casually coarse, merciless.

Estrilda was nowhere to be seen. Paul Penny and Bozo Dullard were wound about each other in the sand. Estrilda must be caught in the tractor.

The tractor had somehow by-passed the Sandhound. It lay on its side, caterpillar treads still going, softly, whiningly. The Sandhound's nostrils dilated. With a scuttling motion, keeping well down, he got behind the tractor. Estrilda was hanging over the steering wheel. The Sandhound let her hang there for the time being,

and rummaged in the compartment where Paul Penny had placed his statically controlled telescope.

The Sandhound came to his full height, glanced around a corner of the tractor. There was something supremely frightening about the way Marybrook advanced, holding the vibro-gun in such a manner that the Sandhound knew he would use it as soon as he saw a target. Would use it on anybody. Even his daughter.

## V

**T**HE SANDHOUND unwound Penny's instrument, his mind hard and cold, striving to recreate Penny's hookup with photographic exactness. The electrodes he clamped onto metal parts of his suit. Penny had not disconnected the instrument panel, nor, indeed, most of the leads. The Sandhound moved the rheostat, and experienced elation when a 12-inch "lens" leaped into being at the height of his head. He moved it around at will, merely by lowering and raising the instrument panel. The lens grew larger under his manipulations, pulsing like a living thing, or apparently solidifying, at his will.

The Sandhound slowly nodded his head, a tiny, grim smile tugging at his lips. This was a chance, a slim chance, but it was the best that presented itself. With the thought, the Sandhound moved from the protection of the tractor full into Marybrook's sight, with the lens between him and Marybrook.

Marybrook saw him instantly. The glass-tsar stopped dead in his tracks, the vibro-gun bearing on the Sandhound. Marybrook's eyes were hard pebbles in his face.

Marybrook's image, and that of the nondescript, ratty-looking sandie who stood beside him, was upside-down to the Sandhound; as the Sandhound's image was to them. The Sandhound counted on that to give Marybrook pause; it did.

The Sandhound called in a voice of iron, "I'll give you ten seconds to turn and go, Marybrook."

Marybrook's frözen, yet healthily pink features, relaxed into a grim scornfulness.

His lips barely moved. "Bluff won't turn the trick. This matter is a little more

important than lives such as yours. So that's Penny's little gadget."

"Hardly a little gadget," the Sandhound said dryly. "This gadget will revolutionize astronomy—as you know. And yet," he mused, "you were willing to postpone that revolution, that progress, for mere financial reasons. Your industrial empire was on the verge of ruin if you didn't fill the contract, eh?"

Marybrook didn't answer. The Sandhound knew he wouldn't. And just as Marybrook fired, the Sandhound manipulated the lens in such a manner that his image, as seen through the lens, rippled, became an unsteady target.

"Ever try to shoot a fish through water?" the Sandhound called cheerfully.

Then all the cheerfulness faded from his eyes. He twirled the rheostat with a deadly purposefulness. The air-lens ballooned up to tremendous size, all of ten feet in diameter. The Sun was hanging above the horizon. Its light and heat passed through the lens, was concentrated down to a focus. And that concentrated brilliance shone full on Marybrook and the corrupt man with him.

Horror, a complete loss of all social veneer, grew like a virulent poison on Marybrook's face. He screamed. His fingers depressed the trigger-button of his weapon, and it was evident that he was letting loose all the power his gun possessed. The Sandhound sensed, rather than felt, that he had been hit. He fell to his knees, but his fingers still played with the rheostat controlling the lens. The beam of magnified brilliance shining on two killer-rats, narrowed down, narrowed down, a deadly beam of heat so virulent that there was suddenly a gush of flame, a tremendous upbillowing of acrid, greasy smoke . . . from where Marybrook and his henchman had stood . . . and around where they had stood, forming an impromptu tombstone and graveyard, sand boiled, turned into glass, blew into huge bubbles—suds—and then froze, cooled into place as the Sandhound was swept away into unconsciousness by the pain that seared through his chest.

It was some hours later. Bozo, Paul Penny, and the Sandhound sat in the compartment beside Estrilda, who was

driving Marybrook's tractor full speed across the early morning desert toward Belleville. The Sandhound's chest was bared where the vibro-ray had seared away a strip of healthy tissue. Tea-leaves, the only substitute for tannic-acid jelly aboard, had been bound onto the wound.

Bozo had come to first, had plugged the hole in the Sandhound's suit. The others were uninjured. It was not until the tractor had started off across heating sands that they knew by what means Marybrook had been disposed of.

"So," the Sandhound smiled quizzically, "Marybrook's death solves a lot of problems. I came to Satterfield City in the first place because it was well known that a human had killed a sorogaster there. Of late years, such murders have been uncommon. I was as much intrigued by the question of who the murderer was, as I was by why the sorogasters didn't rise up in arms over the murder. That question has been answered, too. But your part in it, Estrilda—"

She shrugged, her eyes tight on the undulating desert ahead of the roaring tractor. "I've spent most of my life on Earth. I met Paul at the university, and even then—*sub rosa*—he was working on his electrically created telescope, the next logical advance in astronomy. Glass mirrors were proving so cumbersome that—well, even when they were set up in mid-space or on low-gravity planets like the Moon—"

Penny brought his palm down on his thigh, his eyes glistening. "There's no limit within reason to the size of my lens! I can press a button and make a thousand-inch refractor—a five-thousand inch if necessary. The years and years of casting, annealing, grinding, rougeing—that'll old-hat, now, understand? I—"

The Sandhound interposed gently, "You went on with your work in spite of the fact that your brother, Morton Penny, had been working for years, for almost half of his life, trying to get financial backing to build a telescope observatory on the Moon?"

Penny tossed his head bitterly, and slouched in his seat. His voice was heavy. "I went on because of men like him. Because of men like Dr. George Ellery Hale who got the two hundred inch job started

—an incredible job that took more years to finish than he had of life. I completed my telescope principle just about the time Morton got the financial backing to order the casting of a mirror from Marybrook's glass factories."

He twisted fiercely in his seat, his face pained. "Can you imagine my feelings when I knew I would have to tell my brother that all the effort he had put into his project, all the incredible humiliations he had undergone, all the ill-health he had acquired as a result of that, was absolutely useless? That he would have done just as well not to have fought for his five hundred inch mirror? Well, I knew I'd have to tell him, but I wanted to soften the blow somehow. I was in Satterfield then, and Estrilda had just come in from Earth. I confided in her—she was the only one I ever confided in about the lens. She took the problem to her father, thinking he would refuse the contract, and so give Morton some inkling."

Penny laughed scornfully.

"What neither of us knew, was that Marybrook's empire was on the verge of insolvency. He needed the money the contract would bring. He sent a sorogaster from that settlement back there—not only to steal my plans but to kill me. That little plot went wrong when I killed the sorogaster."

He lapsed into a heavy silence for a moment, and the Sandhound stole a glimpse at Bozo. Bozo was sleeping. Bozo was snoring, gently. The Sandhound turned back to Penny, his eyes sparkling.

"So," he said smoothly, "the next day Marybrook sent for you, said the police knew you had killed a sorogaster, and that if you told Morton about your invention before Marybrook delivered the disk and received payment, Marybrook would give the police the green light to go ahead and prosecute you. And Marybrook would have paid witnesses, eh?"

Penny sighed, his face dark. "He admitted he did. And I couldn't do anything but accept his terms—"

ESTRILDA heard that. She looked back at him, over her shoulder, scorn in her eyes. "There was a principle at stake," she bit out, "and you folded up, is what you mean, Paul Penny. You wouldn't

even confide in me about what my father was doing, for fear I'd go to Morton—or more likely—” and she sneered “—you knew I'd make life so miserable for you you'd be forced to tell Morton. Well, when I saw that you weren't going to tell Morton—” She drew a deep breath, and her expression changed. She spoke to the Sandhound in explanation. “I really did want you to kidnap Paul and take him to Earth, because I knew he wouldn't go of his own accord. I knew that somehow my father was pulling a dirty deal and I didn't exactly trust him either. That's the reason I kept the gun on my father back there when I came in after—after Bozo.”

She looked at Bozo and her perfect lips trembled in the start of a smile. “Then when the police came and my father told them you were a couple of housebreakers who had escaped, I went with the police out of the house because I suspected my father would try to keep me from doing what I had in mind. I didn't know why I felt like that, but I just suspected he was against me. I went to Sorogaster Town with the idea of hiring some sorogasters to kidnap Paul. I picked out the first sorogaster I came to—a terrible dirty creature—and he told me he'd take Paul out to the sorogaster settlement. But that sorogaster told me that besides human money, he would also have to have a drug called colchicine.”

“And you didn't have any idea what colchicine was?” the Sandhound asked quizzically.

“Not until the sorogaster told me that he knew who I was, and that was the reason he had put himself in my path. He said my father had been supplying him and his friends with colchicine, and my father would have some in the house. So I went home and surprised my father with the gun again. My father told me he would give me plenty of colchicine if I told him what I wanted it for. And he did. So I took it, but I tied him to a chair later on. I guess he escaped, and followed me out to the sorogaster settlement.”

Paul Penny's raw-boned face creased in a wry grin. “You're a smart chicken, my girl! Surprised when you discovered the sorogasters had three of us instead of one? Anyway, it's a good thing you didn't give the 'gasters all the colchicine until

they'd released us. And say!—just what the hell is colchicine, anyway?”

“In good time,” the Sandhound smiled, his eyes grave. “You realize, of course, that a charge of murdering a sorogaster still hangs over your head?”

“Do I realize it?” Penny groaned. He smote his thigh. “And it's worse now that Marybrook is dead. The police won't have him to hold them back from prosecuting me.”

The blood fled from Estrilda's face as she took her attention once more from the wheel of the plunging tractor. Her face was frightened. “But—but they can't, Paul! It was self-defense. They haven't any righ. Oh—” her voice lapsed and she looked appealingly at the Sandhound. “He can't be prosecuted—can he?”

“He will,” the Sandhound said definitely. But he leaned forward and gripped Estrilda's arm in a manner that immediately filled her with a sudden hope. “He'll be prosecuted, yes. But he'll be acquitted!”

“**A**QUITTED?” Penny held the word on his lips, in a slow sort of drawl. His brown eyes turned darkly bitter. “Don't hand me that. Maybe you don't know as much about Mars as you think you do. Nobody ever did get away with the murder of a sorogaster. Not for any reason. The law works that way.”

“You'll be acquitted,” the Sandhound insisted. “I promise you that, and I'll send a representative of mine to the trial who will bear evidence to make sure you're acquitted.”

“In the first place, Paul Penny, *you didn't kill a sorogaster!* You killed a different kind of intelligent plant altogether. Sser-Ssp told me that. Because that sorogaster you killed was the offspring of a colchicine-eater.”

Penny and Estrilda were completely mystified.

“Colchicine eater?” Penny queried slowly.

“Colchicine is a drug that causes mutations in plants. They discovered it back on Earth in the 1940's. They secured hundreds of mutations of plants. And those mutations—bear this in mind—were different plants entirely than those plants they sprang from. Just as the offspring of a colchicine-eater is different entirely from his parent.



"And how were they different? Well, they are mutants in that they have the emotions of a human—all the ungentle qualities of a human being; his greed, his ability to hate, to kill, to steal, to lie. Oh, there are minor bodily differences too, I suspect, but the main mutations occurred in the mental make-up. Which is what I mean when I say that no true sorogaster will ever admit that the mutant-sorogasters belong to their species. The true sorogasters would be revolted by the idea. Which means that you didn't kill a sorogaster, and no court will ever convict you!"

The Sandhound settled back against the syntho-leather of the tractor seat, crossing his legs, his smile the smile of a man who is satisfied with the solution of a difficult problem. For the problem was solved! When the proper authorities were notified of the existence of the mutant settlement, it would be wiped off the desert. The mutants that escaped — and the mutants themselves were drug-addicts—would find it so hard hereafter to get hold of colchicine that they would die of colchicine-starvation. That problem would solve itself; and, the Sandhound noted with suddenly lifted eye-brows, any problems that might have stood between Paul Penny and Estrilda Marybrook were solved too. For as the full significance of what the Sandhound said had penetrated, Penny made a vague excuse, and laboriously hopped into the narrow driver's seat in front, beside Estrilda.

The Sandhound closed his eyes, his head propped back. It was apparent that the narrowness of the seat was in this case a virtue. . . .

**A** WEEK LATER, two shadowy figures, shaved, shined, and showered, walked slowly down a side-street of Belleville. The taller of the two lightly swung a cane with his left hand, while his right

maintained an iron grip on the arm of his companion, who lurched along as if in the deepest of drunken trances.

"Can't go on," Bozo Dullard muttered from deep in his chest. "Gotta have my sleep. Not one hour, or eight hours, or a day, or a week, but a solid year. And a half. If I don't sleep I'll die. Chief, *why won't you let me sleep!*"

"You've been sleeping for a week," reminded the Sandhound. He was quite used to all of this, and the curious stares of passers-by that attended the routine.

"That was only a week," Bozo moaned, shuddering with his desire. "I just got started. I was just dozing. I was just about to start to really sleep. Then you woke me up!"

The Sandhound said with dignity, "I felt that if I woke you and brought you to this section of town—which I understand harbors a notorious criminal whom it is our duty to—"

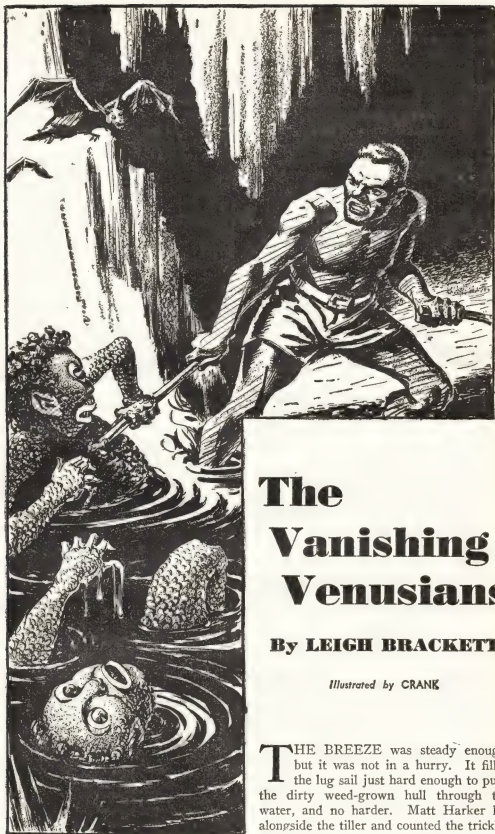
Bobo lurched. "I don't care about duty," he said brokenly. "I don't care about criminals. All I want is sleep. I want to sleep until I'm old and grey and they use my beard for a blanket. I want to sleep until—until—until—"

The abnormally broad-shouldered man the Sandhound was holding erect underwent an amazing change. The sagging muscles of his haggard face tightened. His lidded eyes snapped open. He shook himself free and stood alone, under his own power, peering into the darkness of an odorous alley.

"Oh oh," he said. "Something's up, chief. I feel it. Down that way. *Let's go!*"

The half-smile on the Sandhound's face broadened, as the sense of danger into which he walked quickened in his companion's very manner. Life was good. Adventure beckoned, adventure that was needed with sudden death. For Bozo Dullard was wide awake.





# The Vanishing Venusians

By **LEIGH BRACKETT**

*Illustrated by CRANK*

**T**HE BREEZE was steady enough, but it was not in a hurry. It filled the lug sail just hard enough to push the dirty weed-grown hull through the water, and no harder. Matt Harker lay alongside the tiller and counted the trickles



**For years they had wandered the eternal seas of Venus, seeking the home that was their birthright, death walking in their wake. And now they were making their final bid—three of them fighting toward the promised land, battling for a hopeless cause.**

### ***Planet's Off-Trail Tale***

of sweat crawling over his nakedness, and stared with sullen, opaque eyes into the indigo night. Anger, leashed and impotent, rose in his throat like bitter vomit.

The sea—Rory McLaren's Venusian wife called it the Sea of Morning Opals



—lay unstirring, black, streaked with phosphorescence. The sky hung low over it, the thick cloud blanket of Venus that had made the Sun a half-remembered legend to the exiles from Earth. Riding lights burned in the blue gloom, strung out in line. Twelve ships, thirty-eight hundred people, going no place, trapped in the interval between birth and death and not knowing what to do about it.

Matt Harker glanced upward at the sail and then at the stern lantern of the ship ahead. His face, in the dim glow that lights Venus even at night, was a gaunt oblong of shadows and hard bone, seamed and scarred with living, with wanting and not having, with dying and not being dead. He was a lean man, wiry and not tall, with a snake-like surety of motion.

Somebody came scrambling quietly aft along the deck, avoiding the sleeping bodies crowded everywhere. Harker said, without emotion, "Hi, Rory."

Rory McLaren said, "Hi, Matt." He sat down. He was young, perhaps half Harker's age. There was still hope in his face, but it was growing tired. He sat for a while without speaking, looking at nothing, and then said, "Honest to God, Matt, how much longer can we last?"

"What's the matter, kid? Starting to crack?"

"I don't know. Maybe. When are we going to stop somewhere?"

"When we find a place to stop."

"Is there a place to stop? Seems like ever since I was born we've been hunting. There's always something wrong. Hostile natives, or fever, or bad soil, always something, and we go on again. It's not right. It's not any way to try to live."

Harker said, "I told you not to go having kids."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You start worrying. The kid isn't even here yet, and already you're worrying."

"Sure I am." McLaren put his head in his hands suddenly and swore. Harker knew he did that to keep from crying. "I'm worried," McLaren said, "that maybe the same thing'll happen to my wife and kid that happened to yours. We got fever aboard."

Harker's eyes were like blown coals for an instant. Then he glanced up at the

sail and said, "They'd be better off if it didn't live."

"That's no kind of a thing to say."

"It's the truth. Like you asked me, when are we going to stop somewhere? Maybe never. You bellyache about ever since you were born. Well, I've been at it longer than that. Before you were born I saw our first settlement burned by the Cloud People, and my mother and father crucified in their own vineyard. I was there when this trek to the Promised Land began, back on Earth, and I'm still waiting for the promise."

The sinews in Harker's face were drawn like knots of wire. His voice had a terrible quietness.

"Your wife and kid would be better off to die now, while Viki's still young and has hope, and before the child ever opens its eyes."

SIM, the big black man, relieved Harker before dawn. He started singing, softly—something mournful and slow as the breeze, and beautiful. Harker cursed him and went up into the bow to sleep, but the song stayed with him. *Oh, I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home. . . .*

Harker slept. Presently he began to moan and twitch, and then cry out. People around him woke up. They watched with interest. Harker was a lone wolf awake, ill-tempered and violent. When, at long intervals, he would have one of his spells, no one was anxious to help him out of it. They liked peeping inside of Harker when he wasn't looking.

Harker didn't care. He was playing in the snow again. He was seven years old, and the drifts were high and white, and above them the sky was so blue and clean that he wondered if God mopped it every few days like Mom did the kitchen floor. The sun was shining. It was like a great gold coin, and it made the snow burn like crushed diamonds. He put his arms up to the sun, and the cold air slapped him with clean hands, and he laughed. And then it was all gone. . . .

"By gawd," somebody said. "Ain't them tears on his face?"

"Bawling. Bawling like a little kid. Listen at him."

"Hey," said the first one sheepishly.

"Reckon we oughta wake him up?"

"Hell with him, the old sour-puss. Hey, listen to that . . . !"

"Dad," Harker whispered. "Dad, I want to go home."

THE DAWN came like a sifting of fire-opals through the layers of pearl-grey cloud. Harker heard the yelling dimly in his sleep. He felt dull and tired, and his eyelids stuck together. The yelling gradually took shape and became the word "Land!" repeated over and over. Harker kicked himself awake and got up.

The tideless sea glimmered with opaline colors under the mist. Flocks of little jewel-scaled sea-dragons rose up from the ever-present floating islands of weed, and the weed itself, part of it, writhed and stretched with sentient life.

Ahead there was a long low hummock of muddy ground fading into tangled swamp. Beyond it, rising sheer into the clouds, was a granite cliff, a sweeping escarpment that stood like a wall against the hopeful gaze of the exiles.

Harker found Rory McLaren standing beside him, his arm around Viki, his wife. Viki was one of several Venusians who had married into the Earth colony. Her skin was clear white, her hair a glowing silver, her lips vividly red. Her eyes were like the sea, changeable, full of hidden life. Just now they had that special look that the eyes of women get when they're thinking about creation. Harker looked away.

McLaren said, "It's land."

Harker said, "It's mud. It's swamp. It's fever. It's like the rest."

Viki said, "Can we stop here, just a little while?"

Harker shrugged. "That's up to Gibbons." He wanted to ask what the hell difference it made where the kid was born, but for once he held his tongue. He turned away. Somewhere in the waist a woman was screaming in delirium. There were three shapes wrapped in ragged blankets and laid on planks by the port scuppers. Harker's mouth twitched in a crooked smile.

"We'll probably stop long enough to bury them," he said. "Maybe that'll be time enough."

He caught a glimpse of McLaren's face. The hope in it was not tired any more.

It was dead. Dead, like the rest of Venus.

Gibbons called the chief men together aboard his ship—the leaders, the fighters and hunters and seamen, the tough leathery men who were the armor around the soft body of the colony. Harker was there, and McLaren. McLaren was young, but up until lately he had had a quality of optimism that cheered his shipmates, a natural leadership.

Gibbons was an old man. He was the original guiding spirit of the five thousand colonists who had come out from Earth to a new start on a new world. Time and tragedy, disappointment and betrayal had marked him cruelly, but his head was still high. Harker admired his guts while cursing him for an idealistic fool.

The inevitable discussion started as to whether they should try a permanent settlement on this mud flat or go on wandering over the endless, chartless seas. Harker said impatiently:

"For cripesake, look at the place. Remember the last time. Remember the time before that, and stop bleating."

Sim, the big black, said quietly, "The people are getting awful tired. A man was meant to have roots some place. There's going to be trouble pretty soon if we don't find land."

Harker said, "You think you can find some, pal, go to it."

Gibbons said heavily, "But he's right. There's hysteria, fever, dysentery and boredom, and the boredom's worst of all."

McLaren said, "I vote to settle."

Harker laughed. He was leaning by the cabin port, looking out at the cliffs. The grey granite looked clean above the swamp. Harker tried to pierce the clouds that hid the top, but couldn't. His dark eyes narrowed. The heated voices behind him faded into distance. Suddenly he turned and said, "Sir, I'd like permission to see what's at the top of those cliffs."

There was complete silence. Then Gibbons said slowly, "We've lost too many men on journeys like that before, only to find the plateau uninhabitable."

"There's always the chance. Our first settlement was in the high plateaus, remember. Clean air, good soil, no fever."

"I remember," Gibbons said. "I remember." He was silent for a while, then he gave Harker a shrewd glance. "I know



you, Matt. I might as well give permission."

HARKER grinned. "You won't miss me much anyhow. I'm not a good influence any more." He started for the door. "Give me three weeks. You'll take that long to careen and scrape the bottoms anyhow. Maybe I'll come back with something."

McLaren said, "I'm going with you, Matt."

Harker gave him a level-eyed stare. "You better stay with Viki."

"If there's good land up there, and anything happens to you so you can't come back and tell us. . ."

"Like not bothering to come back, maybe?"

"I didn't say that. Like we both won't come back. But two is better than one."

Harker smiled. The smile was enigmatic and not very nice. Gibbons said, "He's right, Matt." Harker shrugged. Then Sim stood up.

"Two is good," he said, "but three is better." He turned to Gibbons. "There's nearly five hundred of us, sir. If there's new land up there, we ought to share the burden of finding it."

Gibbons nodded. Harker said, "You're crazy, Sim. Why you want to do all that climbing, maybe to no place?"

Sim smiled. His teeth were unbelievably white in the sweat-polished blackness of his face. "But that's what my people always done, Matt. A lot of climbing, to no place."

They made their preparations and had a last night's sleep. McLaren said goodbye to Viki. She didn't cry. She knew why he was going. She kissed him, and all she said was, "Be careful." All he said was, "I'll be back before he's born."

They started at dawn, carrying dried fish and sea-berries made into pemmican, and their long knives and ropes for climbing. They had long ago run out of ammunition for their few blasters, and they had no equipment for making more. All were adept at throwing spears, and carried three short ones barbed with bone across their backs.

It was raining when they crossed the mud flat, wading thigh-deep in heavy mist. Harker led the way through the belt of

swamp. He was an old hand at it, with an uncanny quickness in spotting vegetation that was as independently alive and hungry as he was. Venus is one vast hothouse, and the plants have developed into species as varied and marvelous as the reptiles or the mammals, crawling out of the pre-Cambrian seas as primitive flagellates and growing wills of their own, with appetites and motive power to match. The children of the colony learned at an early age not to pick flowers. The blossoms too often bit back.

The swamp was narrow, and they came out of it safely. A great swamp-dragon, a *leshen*, screamed not far off, but they hunt by night, and it was too sleepy to chase them. Harker stood finally on firm ground and studied the cliff.

The rock was roughened by weather, hacked at by ages of erosion, savaged by earthquake. There were stretches of loose shale and great slabs that looked as though they would peel off at a touch, but Harker nodded.

"We can climb it," he said. "Question is, how high is up?"

Sim laughed. "High enough for the Golden City, maybe. Have we all got a clear conscience? Can't carry no load of sin that far!"

Rory McLaren looked at Harker.

Harker said, "All right, I confess. I don't care if there's land up there or not. All I wanted was to get the hell out of that damn boat before I went clean nuts. So now you know."

McLaren nodded. He didn't seem surprised. "Let's climb."

BY MORNING of the second day they were in the clouds. They crawled upward through opal-tinted steam, half liquid, hot and unbearable. They crawled for two more days. The first night or two Sim sang during his watch, while they rested on some ledge. After that he was too tired. McLaren began to give out, though he wouldn't say so. Matt Harker grew more taciturn and ill-tempered, if possible, but otherwise there was no change. The clouds continued to hide the top of the cliff.

During one rest break McLaren said hoarsely, "Don't these cliffs ever end?"

His skin was yellowish, his eyes glazed with fever.

"Maybe," said Harker, "they go right up beyond the sky." The fever was on him again, too. It lived in the marrow of the exiles, coming out at intervals to shake and sear them, and then retreating. Sometimes it did not retreat, and after nine days there was no need.

McLaren said, "You wouldn't care if they did, would you?"

"I didn't ask you to come."

"But you wouldn't care."

"Ah, shut up."

McLaren went for Harker's throat.

Harker hit him, with great care and accuracy. McLaren sagged down and took his head in his hands and wept. Sim stayed out of it. He shook his head, and after a while he began to sing to himself, or someone beyond himself. "Oh, nobody knows the trouble I see. . . ."

Harker pulled himself up. His ears rang and he shivered uncontrollably, but he could still take some of McLaren's weight on himself. They were climbing a steep ledge, fairly wide and not difficult.

"Let's get on," said Harker.

About two hundred feet beyond that point the ledge dipped and began to go down again in a series of broken steps. Overhead the cliff face bulged outward. Only a fly could have climbed it. They stopped. Harker cursed with vicious slowness. Sim closed his eyes and smiled. He was a little crazy with fever himself.

"Golden city's at the top. That's where I'm going."

He started off along the ledge, following its decline toward a jutting shoulder, around which it vanished. Harker laughed sardonically. McLaren pulled free of him and went doggedly after Sim. Harker shrugged and followed.

Around the shoulder the ledge washed out completely.

They stood still. The steaming clouds shut them in before, and behind was a granite wall hung within thick fleshy creepers. Dead end.

"Well?" said Harker.

McLaren sat down. He didn't cry, or say anything. He just sat. Sim stood with his arms hanging and his chin on his huge black chest. Harker said, "See what I meant, about the Promised Land? Venus

is a fixed wheel, and you can't win."

It was then that he noticed the cool air. He had thought it was just a fever chill, but it lifted his hair, and it had a definite pattern on his body. It even had a cool, clean smell to it. It was blowing out through the creepers.

Harker began ripping with his knife. He broke through into a cave mouth, a jagged rip worn smooth at the bottom by what must once have been a river.

"That draft is coming from the top of the plateau," Harker said. "Wind must be blowing up there and pushing it down. There may be a way through."

McLaren and Sim both showed a slow, terrible growth of hope. The three of them went without speaking into the tunnel.

## II

THEY MADE good time. The clean air acted as a tonic, and hope spurred them on. The tunnel sloped upward rather sharply, and presently Harker heard water, a low thunderous murmur as of an underground river up ahead. It was utterly dark, but the smooth channel of stone was easy to follow.

Sim said, "Isn't that light up ahead?"

"Yeah," said Harker. "Some kind of phosphorescence. I don't like that river. It may stop us."

They went on in silence. The glow grew stronger, the air more damp. Patches of phosphorescent lichen appeared on the walls, glimmering with dim jewel tones like an unhealthy rainbow. The roar of the water was very loud.

They came upon it suddenly. It flowed across the course of their tunnel in a broad channel worn deep into the rock, so that its level had fallen below its old place and left the tunnel dry. It was a wide river, slow and majestic. Lichen spangled the roof and walls, reflecting in dull glints of color from the water.

Overhead there was a black chimney going up through the rock, and the cool draft came from there with almost hurricane force, much of which was dissipated in the main river tunnel. Harker judged there was a cliff formation on the surface that siphoned the wind downward. The chimney was completely inaccessible.

Harker said, "I'll guess we'll have to go upstream, along the side." The rock was eroded enough to make that possible, showing wide ledges at different levels.

McLaren said, "What if this river doesn't come from the surface? What if it starts from an underground source?"

"You stuck your neck out," Harker said. "Come on."

They started. After a while, tumbling like porpoises in the black water, the golden creatures swam by, and saw the men, and stopped, and swam back again.

They were not very large, the largest about the size of a twelve-year-old child. Their bodies were anthropoid, but adapted to swimming with shimmering webs. They glowed with a golden light, phosphorescent like the lichen, and their eyes were lidless and black, like one huge spreading pupil. Their faces were incredible. Harker could remember, faintly, the golden dandelions that grew on the lawn in summer. The heads and faces of the swimmers were like that, covered with streaming petals that seemed to have independent movements, as though they were sensory organs as well as decoration.

Harker said, "For cripesake, what are they?"

"They look like flowers," McLaren said.

"They look more like fish," the black man said.

Harker laughed. "I'll bet they're both. I'll bet they're plannies that grew where they had to be amphibious." The colonists had shortened plant-animal to planimal, and then just planny. "I've seen gimmicks in the swamps that weren't so far away from these. But jeez, get the eyes on 'em! They look human."

"The shape's human, too, almost," McLaren shivered. "I wish they wouldn't look at us that way."

Sim said, "As long as they just look. I'm not gonna worry. . . ."

They didn't. They started to close in below the men, swimming effortlessly against the current. Some of them began to clamber out on the low ledge behind them. They were agile and graceful. There was something unpleasantly child-like about them. There were fifteen or twenty of them, and they reminded Harker of a gang of mischievous kids—only

the mischief had a queer soulless quality of malevolence.

Harker led the way faster along the ledge. His knife was drawn and he carried a short spear in his right hand.

The tone of the river changed. The channel broadened, and up ahead Harker saw that the cavern ended in a vast shadowy place, the water spreading into a dark lake, spilling slowly out over a low wide lip of rock. More of the shining child-things were playing there. They joined their fellows, closing the ring tighter around the three men.

"I don't like this," McLaren said. "If they'd only make a noise!"

They did, suddenly—a shrill tittering like a blasphemy of childish laughter. Their eyes shone. They rushed in, running wetly along the ledge, reaching up out of the water to claw at ankles, laughing. Inside his tough flat belly Harker's guts turned over.

McLAREN yelled and kicked. Claws raked his ankle, spiny needle-sharp things like thorns. Sim ran his spear clean through a golden breast. There were no bones in it. The body was light and membranous, and the blood that ran out was sticky and greenish, like sap. Harker kicked two of the things back in the river, swung his spear like a ball bat and knocked two more off the ledge—they were unbelievably light—and shouted,

"Up there, that high ledge. I don't think they can climb that."

He thrust McLaren bodily past him and helped Sim fight a rearguard action while they all climbed a rotten and difficult transit. McLaren crouched at the top and hurled chunks of stone at the attackers. There was a great crack running up and clear across the cavern roof, scar of some ancient earthquake. Presently a small slide started.

"Okay," Harker panted. "Quit before you bring the roof down. They can't follow us." The plannies were equipped for swimming, not climbing. They clawed angrily and slipped back, and then retreated sullenly to the water. Abruptly they seized the body with Sim's spear through it and devoured it, quarreling fiercely over it. McLaren leaned over the edge and was sick.

Harker didn't feel so good himself. He got up and went on. Sim helped McLaren, whose ankle was bleeding badly.

This higher ledge angled up and around the wall of the great lake-cavern. It was cooler and drier here, and the lichens thinned out, and vanished, leaving total darkness. Harker yelled once. From the echo of his voice the place was enormous.

Down below in the black water golden bodies streaked like comets in an ebon universe, going somewhere, going fast. Harker felt his way carefully along. His skin twitched with a nervous impulse of danger, a sense of something unseen, unnatural, and wicked.

Sim said, "I hear something."

They stopped. The blind air lay heavy with a subtle fragrance, spicy and pleasant, yet somehow unclean. The water sighed lazily far below. Somewhere ahead was a smooth rushing noise which Harker guessed was the river inlet. But none of that was what Sim meant.

He meant the rippling, rustling sound that came from everywhere in the cavern. The black surface of the lake was dotted now with spots of burning phosphorescent color, trailing fiery wakes. The spots grew swiftly, coming nearer, and became carpets of flowers, scarlet and blue and gold and purple. Floating fields of them, and towed by shining swimmers.

"My God," said Harker softly. "How big are they?"

"Enough to make three of me." Sim was a big man. "Those little ones were children, all right. They went and got their papas. Oh, Lord!"

The swimmers were very like the smaller ones that attacked them by the river, except for their giant size. They were not cumbersome. They were magnificent, supple-limbed and light. Their membranes had spread into great shining wings, each rib tipped with fire. Only the golden-dandelion heads had changed.

They had shed their petals. Their adult heads were crowned with flat, coiled growths having the poisonous and filthy beauty of fungus. And their faces were the faces of men.

For the first time since childhood Harker was cold.

The fields of burning flowers were swirled together at the base of the cliff.

The golden giants cried out suddenly, a sonorous belling note, and the water was churned to blazing foam as thousands of flower-like bodies broke away and started up the cliff on suckered, spidery legs.

It didn't look as though it were worth trying, but Harker said, "Let's get the hell on!" There was a faint light now, from the army below. He began to run along the ledge, the others close on his heels. The flower-hounds coursed swiftly upward, and their masters swam easily below, watching.

The ledge dropped. Harker shot along it like a deer. Beyond the lowest dip it plunged into the tunnel whence the river came. A short tunnel, and at the far end. . . .

"Daylight!" Harker shouted. "Daylight!"

McLaren's bleeding leg gave out and he fell.

HARKER caught him. They were at the lowest part of the dip. The flower-beasts were just below, rushing higher. McLaren's foot was swollen, the calf of his leg discolored. Some swift infection from the planny's claws. He fought Harker. "Go on," he said. "Go on!"

Harker slapped him hard across the temple. He started on, half carrying McLaren, but he saw it wasn't going to work. McLaren weighed more than he did. He thrust McLaren into Sim's powerful arms. The big black nodded and ran, carrying the half-conscious man like a child. Harker saw the first of the flower-things flow up onto the ledge in front of them.

Sim hurdled them. They were not large, and there were only three of them. They rushed to follow and Harker speared them, slashing and striking with the sharp bone tip. Behind him the full tide rushed up. He ran, but they were faster. He drove them back with spear and knife, and ran again, and turned and fought again, and by the time they had reached the tunnel Harker was staggering with weariness.

Sim stopped. He said, "There's no way out."

Harker glanced over his shoulder. The river fell sheer down a high face of rock—too high and with too much force in the water even for the giant water-plannies to think of attempting. Daylight poured

through overhead, warm and welcoming, and it might as well have been on Mars.

Dead end.

Then Harker saw the little eroded channel twisting up at the side. Little more than a drain-pipe, and long dry, leading to a passage beside the top of the falls—a crack barely large enough for a small man to crawl through. It was a hell of a ragged hope, but. . .

Harker pointed, between jabs at the swarming flowers. Sim yelled, "You first." Because Harker was the best climber, he obeyed, helping the gasping McLaren up behind him. Sim wielded his spear like a lightning brand, guarding the rear, creeping up inch by inch.

He reached a fairly secure perch, and stopped. His huge chest pumped like a bellows, his arm rose and fell like a polished bar of ebony. Harker shouted to him to come on. He and McLaren were almost at the top.

Sim laughed. "How you going to get me through that little bitty hole?"

"Come on, you fool!"

"You better hurry. I'm about finished."

"Sim! Sim, damn you!"

"Crawl out through that hole, runt, and pull that stringbean with you! I'm a man-sized man, and I got to stay." Then, furiously, "Hurry up or they'll drag you back before you're through."

He was right. Harker knew he was right. He went to work pushing and jamming McLaren through the narrow opening. McLaren was groggy and not much help, but he was thin and small-boned, and he made it. He rolled out on a slope covered with green grass, the first Harker had seen since he was a child. He began to struggle after McLaren. He did not look back at Sim.

The black man was singing, about the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Harker put his head back into the darkness of the creek. "Sim!"

"Yeah?" Faintly, hoarse, echoing.

"There's land here, Sim. Good land."

"Yeah."

"Sim, we'll find a way. . ."

Sim was singing again. The sound grew fainter, diminishing downward into distance. The words were lost, but not what

lay behind them. Matt Harker buried his face in the green grass, and Sim's voice went with him into the dark.

THE CLOUDS were turning color with the sinking of the hidden sun. They hung like a canopy of hot gold washed in blood. It was utterly silent, except for the birds. Birds. You never heard birds like that down in the low places. Matt Harker rolled over and sat up slowly. He felt as though he had been beaten. There was a sickness in him, and a shame, and the old dark anger lying coiled and deadly above his heart.

Before him lay the long slope of grass to the river, which bent away to the left out of sight behind a spur of granite. Beyond the slope was a broad plain and then a forest of gigantic trees. They seemed to float in the coppery haze, their dark branches outspread like wings and starred with flowers. The air was cool, with no taint of mud or rot. The grass was rich, the soil beneath it clean and sweet.

Rory McLaren moaned softly and Harker turned. His leg looked bad. He was in a sort of stupor, his skin flushed and dry. Harker swore softly, wondering what he was going to do.

He looked back toward the plain, and he saw the girl.

He didn't know how she got there. Perhaps out of the bushes that grew in thick clumps on the slope. She could have been there a long time, watching. She was watching now, standing quite still about forty feet away. A great scarlet butterfly clung to her shoulder, moving its wings with lazy delight.

She seemed more like a child than a woman. She was naked, small and slender and exquisite. Her skin had a faint translucent hint of green under its whiteness. Her hair, curled short to her head, was deep blue, and her eyes were blue also, and very strange.

Harker stared at her, and she at him, neither of them moving. A bright bird swooped down and hovered by her lips for a moment, caressing her with its beak. She touched it and smiled, but she did not take her eyes from Harker.

Harker got to his feet, slowly, easily. He said, "Hello."



She did not move, nor make a sound, but quite suddenly a pair of enormous birds, beaked and clawed like eagles and black as sin, made a whistling rush down past Harker's head and returned, circling. Harker sat down again.

The girl's strange eyes moved from him, upward to the crack in the hillside whence he had come. Her lips didn't move, but her voice—or something—spoke clearly inside Harker's head.

"You came from—There." *There* had tremendous feeling in it, and none of it nice.

Harker said, "Yes. A telepath, huh?"

"But you're not. . . ." A picture of the golden swimmers formed in Harker's mind. It was recognizable, but hatred and fear had washed out all the beauty, leaving only horror.

Harker said, "No." He explained about himself and McLaren. He told about Sim. He knew she was listening carefully to his mind, testing it for truth. He was not worried about what she would find. "My friend is hurt," he said. "We need food and shelter."

For some time there was no answer. The girl was looking at Harker again. His face, the shape and texture of his body, his hair, and then his eyes. He had never been looked at quite that way before. He began to grin. A provocative, be-damned-to-you grin that injected a surprising amount of light and charm into his sardonic personality.

"Honey," he said, "you are terrific. Animal, mineral, or vegetable?"

She tipped her small round head in surprise, and asked his own question right back. Harker laughed. She smiled, her mouth making a small inviting V, and her eyes had sparkles in them. Harker started toward her.

Instantly the birds warned him back. The girl laughed, a mischievous ripple of merriment. "Come," she said, and turned away.

Harker frowned. He leaned over and spoke to McLaren, with peculiar gentleness. He managed to get the boy erect, and then swung him across his shoulders, staggering slightly under the weight. McLaren said distinctly, "I'll be back before he's born."

Harker waited until the girl had started, keeping his distance. The two black birds followed watchfully. They walked out across the thick grass of the plain, toward the trees. The sky was now the color of blood.

A light breeze caught the girl's hair and played with it. Matt Harker saw that the short curled strands were broad and flat, like blue petals.

### III

IT WAS a long walk to the forest. The top of the plateau seemed to be bowl-shaped, protected by encircling cliffs. Harker, thinking back to that first settlement long ago, decided that this place was infinitely better. It was like the visions he had seen in fever-dreams—the Promised Land. The coolness and cleanness of it were like having weights removed from your lungs and heart and body.

The rejuvenating air didn't make up for McLaren's weight, however. Presently Harker said, "Hold it," and sat down, tumbling McLaren gently onto the grass. The girl stopped. She came back a little way and watched Harker, who was blowing like a spent horse. He grinned up at her.

"I'm shot," he said. "I've been too busy for a man of my age. Can't you get hold of somebody to help me carry him?"

Again she studied him with puzzled fascination. Night was closing in, a clear indigo, less dark than at sea level. Her eyes had a curious luminosity in the gloom.

"Why do you do that?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Carry it."

By "it" Harker guessed she meant McLaren. He was suddenly, coldly conscious of a chasm between them that no amount of explanation could bridge. "He's my friend. He's . . . I have to."

She studied his thought and then shook her head. "I don't understand. It's spoiled—" her thought-image was a combination of "broken," "finished," and "useless"—"Why carry it around?"

"McLaren's not an 'it.' He's a man like me, my friend. He's hurt, and I have to help him."

"I don't understand." Her shrug said it was his funeral, also that he was crazy

She started on again, paying no attention to Harker's call for her to wait. Perforce, Harker picked up McLaren and staggered on again. He wished Sim were here, and immediately wished he hadn't thought of Sim. He hoped Sim had died quickly before—before what? *"Oh God, it's dark and I'm scared and my belly's all gone to cold water, and that thing trotting ahead of me through the blue haze..."*

The thing was beautiful, though. Beautifully formed, fascinating, a curved slender gleam of moonlight, a chalice flower holding the mystic, scented nectar of the unreal, the unknown, the undiscovered. Harker's blood began, in spite of himself, to throb with a deep excitement.

They came under the fragrant shadows of the trees. The forest was open, with broad mossy rides and clearings. There were flowers underfoot, but no brush, and clumps of ferns. The girl stopped and stretched up her hand. A feathery branch, high out of her reach, bent and brushed her face, and she plucked a great pale blossom and set it in her hair.

She turned and smiled at Harker. He began to tremble, partly with weariness, partly with something else.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

She was puzzled. "The branch, you mean? Oh, that!" She laughed. It was the first sound he had heard her make, and it shot through him like warm silver. "I just think I would like a flower, and it comes."

Teleportation, telekinetic energy—what did the books call it? Back on Earth they knew something about that, but the colony hadn't had much time to study even its own meager library. There had been some religious sect that could make roses bend into their hands. Old wisdom, the force behind the Biblical miracles, just the infinite power of thought. Very simple. Yeah. Harker wondered uneasily whether she could work it on him, too. But then, he had a brain of his own. Or did he?

"What's your name?" he asked.

She gave a clear, trilled sound. Harker tried to whistle it and gave up. Some sort of tone-language, he guessed, without words as he knew them. It sounded as though they—her people, whatever they were—had copied the birds.

"I'll call you Button," he said. "Bache-

lor Button—but you wouldn't know."

She picked the image out of his mind and sent it back to him. Blue fringe-topped flowers nodding in his mother's china bowl. She laughed again and sent her black birds away and led on into the forest, calling out like an oriole. Other voices answered her, and presently, racing the light wind between the trees, her people came.

THEY were like her. There were males, slender little creatures like young boys, and girls like Button. There were several hundred of them, all naked, all laughing and curious, their lithe pliant bodies flitting moth-fashion through the indigo shadows. They were topped with petals—Harker called them that, though he still wasn't sure—of all colors from blood-scarlet to pure white.

They trilled back and forth. Apparently Button was telling them all about how she found Harker and McLaren. The whole mob pushed on slowly through the forest and ended finally in a huge clearing where there were only scattered trees. A spring rose and made a little lake, and then a stream that wandered off among the ferns.

More of the little people came, and now he saw the young ones. All sizes, from tiny thin creatures on up, replicas of their elders. There were no old ones. There were none with imperfect or injured bodies. Harker, exhausted and on the thin edge of a fever-bout, was not encouraged.

He set McLaren down by the spring. He drank, gasping like an animal, and bathed his head and shoulders. The forest people stood in a circle, watching. They were silent now. Harker felt coarse and bestial, somehow, as though he had belched loudly in church.

He turned to McLaren. He bathed him, helped him drink, and set about fixing the leg. He needed light, and he needed flame.

There were dry leaves, and mats of dead moss in the rocks around the spring. He gathered a pile of these. The forest people watched. Their silent luminous stare got on Harker's nerves. His hands were shaking so that he made four tries with his flint and steel before he got a spark.

The tiny flicker made the silent ranks stir sharply. He blew on it. The flames

licked up, small and pale at first, then taking hold, growing, crackling. He saw their faces in the springing light, their eyes stretched with terror. A shrill crying broke from them and then they were gone, like rustling leaves before a wind.

Harker drew his knife. The forest was quiet now. Quiet but not at rest. The skin crawled on Harker's back, over his scalp, drew tight on his cheekbones. He passed the blade through the flame. McLaren looked up at him. Harker said, "It's okay, Rory," and hit him carefully on the point of the jaw. McLaren lay still. Harker stretched out the swollen leg and went to work.

IT WAS dawn again. He lay by the spring in the cool grass, the ashes of his fire grey and dead beside the dark stains. He felt rested, relaxed, and the fever seemed to have gone out of him. The air was like wine.

He rolled over on his back. There was a wind blowing. It was a live, strong wind, with a certain smell to it. The trees were rollicking, almost shouting with pleasure. Harker breathed deeply. The smell, the pure clean edge. . . .

Suddenly he realized that the clouds were high, higher than he had ever known them to be. The wind swept them up, and the daylight was bright, so bright that. . . .

Harker sprang up. The blood rushed in him. There was a stinging blur in his eyes. He began to run, toward a tall tree, and he flung himself upward into the branches and climbed, recklessly, into the swaying top.

The bowl of the valley lay below him, green, rich, and lovely. The grey granite cliffs rose around it, grew higher in the direction from which the wind blew. Higher and higher, and beyond them, far beyond, were mountains, flung towering against the sky.

On the mountains, showing through the whipping veils of cloud, there was snow, white and cold and blindingly pure, and as Harker watched there was a gleam, so quick and fleeting that he saw it more with his heart than with his eyes. . . .

Sunlight. Snowfields, and above them, the sun.

After a long time he clambered down again into the silence of the glade. He

stood there, not moving, seeing what he had not had time to see before.

Rory McLaren was gone. Both packs, with food and climbing ropes and bandages and flint-and-steel were gone. The short spears were gone. Feeling on his hip, Harker found nothing but bare flesh. His knife and even his breech-clout had been taken.

A slender, exquisite body moved forward from the shadows of the trees. Huge white blossoms gleamed against the curly blue that crowned the head. Luminous eyes glanced up at Harker, full of mockery and a subtle animation. Button smiled.

Matt Harker walked toward Button, not hurrying, his hard sinewy face blank of expression. He tried to keep his mind that way, too. "Where is the other one; my friend?"

"In the finish-place." She nodded vaguely toward the cliffs near where Harker and McLaren had escaped from the caves. Her thought-image was somewhere between rubbish-heap and cemetery, as nearly as Harker could translate it. It was also completely casual, a little annoyed that time should be wasted on such trifles.

"Did you . . . is he still alive?"

"It was when we put it there. It will be all right, it will just wait until it—stops. Like all of them."

"Why was he moved? Why did you. . . ."

"It was ugly." Button shrugged. "It was broken, anyway." She stretched her arms upward and lifted her head to the wind. A shiver of delight ran through her. She smiled again at Harker, side-long.

He tried to keep his anger hidden. He started walking again, not as though he had any purpose in mind, bearing toward the cliffs. His way lay past a bush with yellow flowers and thorny, pliant branches. Suddenly it writhed and whipped him across the belly. He stopped short and doubled over, hearing Button's laughter.

When he straightened up she was in front of him. "It's red," she said, surprised, and laid little pointed fingers on the scratches left by the thorns. She seemed thrilled and fascinated by the color and feel of his blood. Her fingers moved, probing the shape of his muscles, the texture of his skin and the dark hair on his

chest. They drew small lines of fire along his neck, along the ridge of his jaw, touching his features one by one, his eyelids, his black brows.

"What are you?" whispered her mind to his.

"This." Harker put his arms around her, slowly. Her flesh slid cool and strange under his hands, sending an indescribable shudder through him, partly pleasure, partly revulsion. He bent his head. Her eyes deepened, lakes of blue fire, and then he found her lips. They were cool and strange like the rest of her, pliant, scented with spice, the same perfume that came with sudden overpowering sweetness from her curling petals.

Harker saw movement in the forest aisles, a clustering of bright flower-heads. Button drew back. She took his hand and led him away, off toward the river and the quiet ferny places along its banks. Glancing up, Harker saw that the two black birds were following overhead.

**"YOU ARE** really plants, then? Flowers, like those?" He touched the white blossoms on her head.

"You are really a beast, then? Like the furry, snarling things that climb up through the pass sometimes?"

They both laughed. The sky above them was the color of clean fleece. The warm earth and crushed ferns were sweet beneath them. "What pass?" asked Harker.

"Over there." She pointed off toward the rim of the valley. "It goes down to the sea, I think. Long ago we used to go down there but there's no need, and the beasts make it dangerous."

"Do they," said Harker, and kissed her in the hollow below her chin. "What happens when the beasts come?"

Button laughed. Before he could stir Harker was trapped fast in a web of creepers and tough fern, and the black birds were screeching and clashing their sharp beaks in his face.

"That happens," Button said. She stroked the ferns. "Our cousins understand us, even better than the birds."

Harker lay sweating, even after he was free again. Finally he said, "Those creatures in the underground lake. Are they your cousins?"

Button's fear-thought thrust against his

mind like hands pushing away. "No, don't . . . Long, long ago the legend is that this valley was a huge lake, and the Swimmers lived in it. They were a different species from us, entirely. We came from the high gorges, where there are only barren cliffs now. This was long ago. As the lake receded, we grew more numerous and began to come down, and finally there was a battle and we drove the Swimmers over the falls into the black lake. They have tried and tried to get out, to get back to the light, but they can't. They send their thoughts through to us sometimes. They . . ." She broke off. "I don't want to talk about them any more."

"How would you fight them if they did get out?" asked Harker easily. "Just with the birds and the growing things?"

Button was slow in answering. Then she said, "I will show you one way." She laid her hand across his eyes. For a moment there was only darkness. Then a picture began to form—people, his own people, seen as reflections in a dim and distorted mirror but recognizable. They poured into the valley through a notch in the cliffs, and instantly every bush and tree and blade of grass was bent against them. They fought, slashing with their knives, making headway, but slowly. And then, across the plain, came a sort of fog, a thin drifting curtain of soft white.

It came closer, moving with force of its own, not heeding the wind. Harker saw that it was thistledown. Seeds, borne on silky wings. It settled over the people trapped in the brush. It was endless and unhurrying, covering them all with a fine fleece. They began to writhe and cry out with pain, with a terrible fear. They struggled, but they couldn't get away.

The white down dropped away from them. Their bodies were covered with countless tiny green shoots, sucking the chemicals from the living flesh and already beginning to grow.

Button's spoken thought cut across the image. "I have seen your thoughts, some of them, since the moment you came out of the caves. I can't understand them, but I can see our plains gashed to the raw earth and our trees cut down and everything made ugly. If your kind came here, we would have to go. And the valley belongs to us."

Matt Harker's brain lay still in the darkness of his skull, wary, drawn in upon itself. "It belonged to the Swimmers first."

"They couldn't hold it. We can."

"Why did you save me, Button? What do you want of me?"

"There was no danger from you. You were strange. I wanted to play with you."

"Do you love me, Button?" His fingers touched a large smooth stone among the fern roots.

"Love? What is that?"

"It's tomorrow and yesterday. It's hoping and happiness and pain, the complete self because it's selfless, the chain that binds you to life and makes living it worth while. Do you understand?"

"No. I grow, I take from the soil and the light, I play with the others, with the birds and the wind and the flowers. When the time comes I am ripe with seed, and after that I go to the finish-place and wait. That's all I understand. That's all there is."

He looked up into her eyes. A shudder crept over him. "You have no soul, Button. That's the difference between us. You live, but you have no soul."

After that it was not so hard to do what he had to do. To do quickly, very quickly, the thing that was his only faint chance of justifying Sim's death. The thing that Button may have glimpsed in his mind but could not guard against, because there was no understanding in her of the thought of murder.

## IV

THE BLACK birds darted at Harker, but the compulsion that sent them flickered out too soon. The ferns and creepers shook, and then were still, and the birds flew heavily away. Matt Harker stood up.

He thought he might have a little time. The flower-people probably kept in pretty close touch mentally, but perhaps they wouldn't notice Button's absence for a while. Perhaps they weren't prying into his own thoughts, because he was Button's toy. Perhaps. . . .

He began to run, toward the cliffs where the finish-place was. He kept as much as possible in the open, away from shrubs. He did not look again, before he left, at what lay by his feet.

He was close to his destination when he knew that he was spotted. The birds returned, rushing down at him on black whistling wings. He picked up a dead branch to beat them off and it crumbled in his hands. Telekinesis, the power of mind over matter. Harker had read once that if you knew how you could always make your point by thinking the dice into position. He wished he could think himself up a blaster. Curved beaks ripped his arms. He covered his face and grabbed one of the birds by the neck and killed it. The other one screamed and this time Harker wasn't so lucky. By the time he had killed the second one he'd felt claws in him and his face was laid open along the cheekbones. He began to run again.

Bushes swayed toward him as he passed. Thorny branches stretched. Creepers rose like snakes from the grass, and every green blade was turned knife-like against his feet. But he had already reached the cliffs and there were open rocky spaces and the undergrowth was thin.

He knew he was near the finish-place because he could smell it. The gentle withered fragrance of flowers past their prime, and under that a dead, sour decay. He shouted McLaren's name, sick with dread that there might not be an answer, weak with relief when there was one. He raced over tumbled rocks toward the sound. A small creeper tangled his foot and brought him down. He wrenched it by the roots from its shallow crevice and went on. As he glanced back over his shoulder he saw a thin white veil, a tiny patch in the distant air, drifting toward him.

He came to the finish-place.

It was a box canyon, quite deep, with high sheer walls, so that it was almost like a wide well. In the bottom of it bodies were thrown in a dry, spongy heap. Colorless flower-bodies, withered and grey, an incredible compost pile.

Rory McLaren lay on top of it, apparently unhurt. The two packs were beside him, with the weapons. Strewn over the heap, sitting, lying, moving feebly about, were the ones who waited, as Button had put it, to stop. Here were the aged, the faded and worn out, the imperfect and injured, where their ugliness could not offend. They seemed already dead mentally. They paid no attention to the men, nor to



each other. Sheer blind vitality kept them going a little longer, as a geranium will bloom long after its cut stalk is desiccated.

"Matt," McLaren said. "Oh, God, Matt, I'm glad to see you!"

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. My leg even feels pretty good. Can you get me out?"

"Throw those packs up here."

McLaren obeyed. He began to catch Harker's feverish mood, warned by Harker's bleeding, ugly face that something nasty was afoot. Harker explained rapidly while he got out one of the ropes and half hauled McLaren out of the pit. The white veil was close now. Very close.

"Can you walk?" Harker asked.

McLaren glanced at the fleecy cloud. Harker had told him about it. "I can walk," he said. "I can run like hell."

Harker handed him the rope. "Get around the other side of the canyon. Clear across, see?" He helped McLaren on with his pack. "Stand by with the rope to pull me up. And keep to the bare rocks."

McLaren went off. He limped badly, his face twisted with pain. Harker swore. The cloud was so close that now he could see the millions of tiny seeds floating on their silken fibres, thistledown guided by the minds of the flower-people in the valley. He shrugged into his pack straps and began winding bandages and tufts of dead grass around the bone tip of a recovered spear. The edge of the cloud was almost on him when he got a spark into the improvised torch and sprang down onto the heap of dead flower-things in the pit.

He sank and floundered on the treacherous surface, struggling across it while he applied the torch. The dry, withered substance caught. He raced the flames to the far wall and glanced back. The dying creatures had not stirred, even when the fire engulfed them. Overhead, the edges of the seed-cloud flared and crisped. It moved on blindly over the fire. There was a pale flash of light and the cloud vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Rory!" Harker yelled. "Rory!"

FOR A LONG minute he stood there, coughing, strangling in thick smoke, feeling the rushing heat crisp his skin. Then, when it was almost too late, McLaren's sweating face appeared above him

and the rope snaked down. Tongues of flame flicked his backside angrily as he ran monkey-fashion up the wall.

They got away from there, higher on the rocky ground, slashing occasionally with their knives at brush and creepers they could not avoid. McLaren shuddered.

"It's impossible," he said. "How do they do it?"

"They're blood cousins. Or should I say sap. Anyway, I suppose it's like radio control—a matter of transmitting the right frequencies. Here, take it easy a minute."

McLaren sank down gratefully. Blood was seeping through the tight bandages where Harker had incised his wound. Harker looked back into the valley.

The flower people were spread out in a long crescent, their bright multi-colored heads clear against the green plain. Harker guessed that they would be guarding the pass. He guessed that they had known what was going on in his mind as well as Button had. New form of communism, one mind for all and all for one mind. He could see that even without McLaren's disability they couldn't make it to the pass. Not a mouse could have made it.

He wondered how soon the next seed-cloud would come.

"What are we going to do, Matt? Is there any way . . ." McLaren wasn't thinking about himself. He was looking at the valley like Lucifer yearning at Paradise, and he was thinking of Viki. Not just Viki alone, but Viki as a symbol of thirty-eight hundred wanderers on the face of Venus.

"I don't know," said Harker. "The pass is out, and the caves are out . . . hey! Remember when we were fighting off those critters by the river and you nearly started a cave-in throwing rocks? There was a fault there, right over the edge of the lake. An earthquake split. If we could get at it from the top and shake it down. . . ."

It was a minute before McLaren caught on. His eyes widened. "A slide would dam up the lake. . . ."

"If the level rose enough, the Swimmers could get out." Harker gazed with sultry eyes at the bobbing flower heads below.

"But if the valley's flooded, Matt, and those critters take over, where does that leave our people?"

"There wouldn't be too much of a slide,

I don't think. The rock's solid on both sides of the fault. And anyway, the weight of the water backed up there would push through anything, even a concrete dam, in a couple of weeks." Harker studied the valley floor intently. "See the way that slopes there? Even if the slide didn't wash out, a little digging would drain the flood off down the pass. We'd just be making a new river."

"Maybe." McLaren nodded. "I guess so. But that still leaves the Swimmers. I don't think they'd be any nicer than these babies about giving up their land." His tone said he would rather fight Button's people any day.

Harker's mouth twisted in a slow grin. "The Swimmers are water creatures, Rory. Amphibious. Also, they've lived underground, in total darkness, for God knows how long. You know what happens to angleworms when you get 'em out in the light. You know what happens to fungus that grows in the dark." He ran his fingers over his skin, almost with reverence. "Noticed anything about yourself, Rory? Or have you been too busy?"

McLaren stared. He rubbed his own skin, and winced, and rubbed again, watching his fingers leave streaks of livid white that faded instantly. "Sunburn," he said wonderingly. "My God. Sunburn!"

Harker stood up. "Let's go take a look." Down below the flower heads were agitated. "They don't like that thought, Rory. Maybe it can be done, and they know it."

McLaren rose, leaning on a short spear like a cane. "Mat. They won't let us get away with it."

Harker frowned. "Button said there were other ways beside the seed. . . ." He turned away. "No use standing here worrying about it."

THEY started climbing again, very slowly on account of McLaren. Harker tried to gauge where they were in relation to the cavern beneath. The river made a good guide. The rocks were almost barren of growth here, which was a godsend. He watched, but he couldn't see anything threatening approaching from the valley. The flower people were mere dots now, perfectly motionless.

The rock formation changed abruptly. Ancient quakes had left scars in the shape

of twisted strata, great leaning slabs of granite poised like dancers, and cracks that vanished into darkness.

Harker stopped. "This is it. Listen, Rory. I want you to go off up there, out of the danger area. . . ."

"Mat, I. . . ."

"Shut up. One of us has got to be alive to take word back to the ships as soon as he can get through the valley. There's no great rush and you'll be able to travel in three-four days. You. . . ."

"But why me? You're a better mountain man. . . ."

"You're married," said Harker curtly. "It'll only take one of us to shove a couple of those big slabs down. They're practically ready to fall of their own weight. Maybe nothing will happen. Maybe I'll get out all right. But it's a little silly if both of us take the risk, isn't it?"

"Yeah. But Matt. . . ."

"Listen, kid." Harker's voice was oddly gentle. "I know what I'm doing. Give my regards to Viki and the. . . ."

He broke off with a sharp cry of pain. Looking down incredulously, he saw his body covered with little tentative flames, feeble, flickering, gone, but leaving their red footprints behind them.

McLaren had the same thing.

They stared at each other. A helpless terror took Harker by the throat. Telekinesis again. The flower people turning his own weapon against them. They had seen fire, and what it did, and they were copying the process in their own minds, concentrating, all of them together, the whole mental force of the colony centered on the two men. He could even understand why they focused on the skin. They had taken the sunburn-thought and applied it literally.

Fire. Spontaneous combustion. A simple, easy reaction, if you knew the trick. There was something about a burning bush. . . .

The attack came again, stronger this time. The flower people were getting the feel of it now. It hurt. Oh God, it hurt. McLaren screamed. His loincloth and bandages began to smoulder.

*What to do, thought Harker, quick, tell me what to do. . . .*

The flower people focus on us through our minds, our conscious minds. Maybe

they can't get the subconscious so easily, because the thoughts are not directed, they're images, symbols, vague things. Maybe if Rory couldn't think consciously they couldn't find him. . . .

Another flare of burning, agonizing pain. In a minute they'll have the feel of it. They can keep it going. . . .

Without warning, Harker slugged McLaren heavily on the jaw and dragged him away to where the rock was firm. He did it all with astonishing strength and quickness. There was no need to save himself. He wasn't going to need himself much longer.

He went away a hundred feet or so, watching McLaren. A third attack struck him, sickened and dazed him so that he nearly fell. Rory McLaren was not touched.

Harker smiled. He turned and ran back toward the rotten place in the cliffs. A part of his conscious thought was so strongly formed that his body obeyed it automatically, not stopping even when the flames appeared again and again on his flesh, brightening, growing, strengthening as the thought-energies of Button's people meshed together. He flung down one teetering giant of stone, and the shock jarred another loose. Harker stumbled on to a third, based on a sliding bed of shale, and thrust with all his strength and beyond it, and it went too, with crashing thunder.

Harker fell. The universe dissolved into shuddering, roaring chaos beyond a bright veil of flame and a smell of burning flesh. By that time there was only one thing clear in Matt Harker's understanding—the second part of his conscious mind, linked to and even stronger than the first.

The image he carried with him into death was a tall mountain with snow on its shoulders, blazing in the sun.

IT WAS NIGHT. Rory McLaren lay prone on a jutting shelf above the valley. Below him the valley was lost in indigo shadows, but there was a new sound in it—the swirl of water, angry and swift.

There was new life in it, too. It rode the crest of the flood waters, burning gold in the blue night, shining giants returning in vengeance to their own place. Great patches of blazing jewel-toned phosphorescence dotted the water—the flowerhounds, turned loose to hunt. And in between them, rolling and leaping in deadly play, the young of the Swimmers went.

McLaren watched them hunt the forest people. He watched all night, shivering with dread, while the golden titans exacted payment for the ages they had lived in darkness. By dawn it was all over. And then, through the day, he watched the Swimmers die.

The river, turned back on itself, barred them from the caves. The strong bright light beat down. The Swimmers turned at first to greet it with a pathetic joy. And then they realized. . . .

McLaren turned away. He waited, resting, until, as Harker had predicted, the block washed away and the backed-up water could flow normally again. The valley was already draining when he found the pass. He looked up at the mountains and breathed the sweet wind, and felt a great shame and humility that he was here to do it.

He looked back toward the caves where Sim had died, and the cliffs above where he had buried what remained of Matt Harker. It seemed to him that he should say something, but no words came, only that his chest was so full he could hardly breathe. He turned mutely down the rocky pass, toward the Sea of Morning Opals and the thirty-eight hundred wanderers who had found a home.



# The Happy Castaway

BY ROBERT E. McDOWELL

Being space-wrecked and marooned is tough enough. But to face the horrors of such a planet as this was too much. Imagine Fawkes' terrible predicament; plenty of food—and twenty seven beautiful girls for companions.



Illustrated by ANDERSON

**J**ONATHAN FAWKES opened his eyes. He was flat on his back, and a girl was bending over him. He detected a frightened expression on the girl's

face. His pale blue eyes traveled upward beyond the girl. The sky was his roof, yet he distinctly remembered going to sleep on his bunk aboard the space ship.

"You're not dead?"

"I've some doubt about that," he replied dryly. He levered himself to his elbows. The girl, he saw, had bright yellow hair. Her nose was pert, tip-tilted. She had on a ragged blue frock and sandals.

"Is—is anything broken?" she asked.

"Don't know. Help me up." Between them he managed to struggle to his feet. He winced. He said, "My name's Jonathan Fawkes. I'm a space pilot with Universal. What happened? I feel like I'd been poured out of a concrete mixer."

She pointed to the wreck of a small space freighter a dozen feet away. Its nose was buried in the turf, folded back like an accordion. It had burst open like a ripe watermelon. He was surprised that he had survived at all. He scratched his head. "I was running from Mars to Jupiter with a load of seed for the colonists."

"Oh!" said the girl, biting her lips. "You're co-pilot must be in the wreckage."

He shook his head. "No," he reassured her. "I left him on Mars. He had an attack of space sickness. I was all by myself; that was the trouble. I'd stay at the controls as long as I could, then lock her on her course and snatch a couple of hours' sleep. I can remember crawling into my bunk. The next thing I knew you were bending over me." He paused. "I guess the automatic deflectors slowed me up or I would have been a cinder by this time," he said.

The girl didn't reply. She continued to watch him, a faint enigmatic smile on her lips. Jonathan glanced away in embarrassment. He wished that pretty women didn't upset him so. He said nervously, "Where am I? I couldn't have slept all the way to Jupiter."

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know."

"You don't know!" He almost forgot his self-consciousness in his surprise. His pale blue eyes returned to the landscape. A mile across the plain began a range of jagged foothills, which tossed upward higher and higher until they merged with the blue saw-edge of a chain of mountains. As he looked a puff of smoke belched from a truncated cone-shaped peak. A volcano. Otherwise there was no sign of life: just he and the strange yellow-headed girl alone in the center of that vast rolling prairie.

"I was going to explain," he heard her say. "We think that we are on an asteroid."

"We?" he looked back at her.

"Yes. There are twenty-seven of us. We were on our way to Jupiter, too, only we were going to be wives for the colonists."

"I remember," he exclaimed. "Didn't the Jupiter Food-growers Association enlist you girls to go to the colonies?"

She nodded her head. "Only twenty-seven of us came through the crash."

"Everybody thought your space ship hit a meteor," he said.

"We hit this asteroid."

"But that was three years ago."

"Has it been that long? We lost track of time." She didn't take her eyes off him, not for a second. Such attention made him acutely self conscious. She said. "I'm Ann. Ann Clotilde. I was hunting when I saw your space ship. You had been thrown clear. You were lying all in a heap. I thought you were dead." She stooped, picked up a spear.

"Do you feel strong enough to hike back to our camp? It's only about four miles," she said.

"I think so," he said.

JONATHAN FAWKES fidgeted uncomfortably. He would rather pilot a space ship through a meteor field than face twenty-seven young women. They were the only thing in the Spaceways of which he was in awe. Then he realized that the girl's dark blue eyes had strayed beyond him. A frown of concentration marred her regular features. He turned around.

On the rim of the prairie he saw a dozen black specks moving toward them.

She said: "Get down!" Her voice was agitated. She flung herself on her stomach and began to crawl away from the wreck. Jonathan Fawkes stared after her stupidly. "Get down!" she reiterated in a furious voice.

He let himself to his hands and knees. "Ouch!" he said. He felt like he was being jabbed with pins. He must be one big bruise. He scuttled after the girl. "What's wrong?"

The girl looked back at him over her shoulder. "Centaurs!" she said. "I didn't know they had returned. There is a small ravine just ahead which leads into the hills.



I don't think they've seen us. If we can reach the hills we'll be safe."

"Centaur! Isn't there anything new under the sun?"

"Well, personally," she replied, "I never saw a Centaur until I was wrecked on this asteroid." She reached the ravine, crawled head foremost over the edge. Jonathan tumbled after her. He hit the bottom, winced, scrambled to his feet. The girl started at a trot for the hills. Jonathan, groaning at each step, hobbled beside her.

"Why won't the Centaurs follow us into the hills?" he panted.

"Too rough. They're like horses," she said. "Nothing but a goat could get around in the hills."

The gulley, he saw, was deepening into a respectable canyon, then a gorge. In half a mile, the walls towered above them. A narrow ribbon of sky was visible overhead. Yellow fern-like plants sprouted from the crevices and floor of the canyon.

They flushed a small furry creature from behind a bush. As it sped away, it resembled a cottontail of Earth. The girl whipped back her arm, flung the spear. It transfixed the rodent. She picked it up, tied it to her waist. Jonathan gaped. Such strength and accuracy astounded him. He thought, amazons and centaurs. He thought, but this is the year 3372; not the time of ancient Greece.

The canyon bore to the left. It grew rougher, the walls more precipitate. Jonathan limped to a halt. High boots and breeches, the uniform of Universal's space pilots, hadn't been designed for walking. "Hold on," he said. He felt in his pockets, withdrew an empty cigarette package, crumpled it and hurled it to the ground.

"You got a cigarette?" he asked without much hope.

The girl shook her head. "We ran out of tobacco the first few months we were here."

Jonathan turned around, started back for the space ship.

"Where are you going?" cried Ann in alarm.

He said, "I've got a couple of cartons of cigarettes back at the freighter. Centaurs or no centaurs, I'm going to get a smoke."

"No!" She clutched his arm. He was

surprised at the strength of her grip. "They'd kill you," she said.

"I can sneak back," he insisted stubbornly. "They might loot the ship. I don't want to lose those cigarettes. I was hauling some good burley tobacco seed too. The colonists were going to experiment with it on Ganymede."

"No!"

He lifted his eyebrows. He thought, she is an amazon! He firmly detached her hand.

The girl flicked up her spear, nicked his neck with the point of it. "We are going to the camp," she said.

Jonathan threw himself down backwards, kicked the girl's feet out from under her. Like a cat he scrambled up and wrenched the spear away.

A voice shouted: "What's going on there?"

HE PAUSED shamefacedly. A second girl, he saw, was running toward them from up the canyon. Her bare legs flashed like ivory. She was barefooted, and she had black hair. A green cloth was wrapped around her sarong fashion. She bounced to a stop in front of Jonathan, her brown eyes wide in surprise. He thought her sarong had been a table cloth at one time in its history.

"A man!" she breathed. "By Jupiter and all its little moons, it's a man!"

"Don't let him get away!" cried Ann.

"Hilda!" the brunette shrieked. "A man! It's a man!"

A third girl skidded around the bend in the canyon. Jonathan backed off warily.

Ann Clotilde cried in anguish: "Don't let him get away!"

Jonathan chose the centaurs. He wheeled around, dashed back the way he had come. Someone tackled him. He rolled on the rocky floor of the canyon. He struggled to his feet. He saw six more girls race around the bend in the canyon. With shouts of joy they flung themselves on him.

Jonathan was game, but the nine husky amazons pinned him down by sheer weight. They bound him hand and foot. Then four of them picked him up bodily, started up the canyon chanting: "*He was a rocket riding daddy from Mars.*" He recognized it as a popular song of three years ago.

Jonathan had never been so humiliated

in his life. He was known in the spaceways from Mercury to Jupiter as a man to leave alone. His nose had been broken three times. A thin white scar crawled down the bronze of his left cheek, relic of a barroom brawl on Venus. He was big, rangy, tough. And these girls had trounced him. Girls! He almost wept from mortification.

He said, "Put me down. I'll walk."

"You won't try to get away?" said Ann.

"No," he replied with as much dignity as he could summon while being held aloft by four barbarous young women.

"Let him down," said Ann. "We can catch him, anyway, if he makes a break."

Jonathan Fawkes' humiliation was complete. He meekly trudged between two husky females, who ogled him shamelessly. He was amazed at the ease with which they had carried him. He was six feet three and no light weight. He thought enviously of the centaurs, free to gallop across the plains. He wished he was a centaur.

The trail left the canyon, struggled up the precipitate walls. Jonathan picked his way gingerly, hugged the rock. "Don't be afraid," advised one of his captors. "Just don't look down."

"I'm not afraid," said Jonathan hotly. To prove it he trod the narrow ledge with scorn. His foot struck a pebble. Both feet went out from under him. He slithered halfway over the edge. For one sickening moment he thought he was gone, then Ann grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, hauled him back to safety. He lay gasping on his stomach. They tied a rope around his waist then, and led him the rest of the way to the top like a baby on a leash. He was too crestfallen to resent it.

The trail came out on a high ridge. They paused on a bluff overlooking the prairie.

"Look!" cried Ann pointing over the edge.

A half dozen beasts were trotting beneath on the plain. At first, Jonathan mistook them for horses. Then he saw that from the withers up they resembled men. Waists, shoulders, arms and heads were identical to his own, but their bodies were the bodies of horses.

"Centaur!" Jonathan Fawkes said, not believing his eyes.

THE GIRLS set up a shout and threw stones down at the centaurs, who reared, pawed the air, and galloped to a safe distance, from which they hurled back insults in a strange tongue. Their voices sounded faintly like the neighing of horses.

Amazons and centaurs, he thought again. He couldn't get the problem of the girls' phenomenal strength out of his mind. Then it occurred to him that the asteroid, most likely, was smaller even than Earth's moon. He must weigh about a thirtieth of what he usually did, due to the lessened gravity. It also occurred to him that they would be thirty times as strong. He was staggered. He wished he had a smoke.

At length, the amazons and the centaurs tired of bandying insults back and forth. The centaurs galloped off into the prairie, the girls resumed their march. Jonathan scrambled up hills, skidded down slopes. The brunette was beside him helping him over the rough spots.

"I'm Olga," she confided. "Has anybody ever told you what a handsome fellow you are?" She pinched his cheek. Jonathan blushed.

They climbed a ridge, paused at the crest. Below them, he saw a deep valley. A stream tumbled through the center of it. There were trees along its banks, the first he had seen on the asteroid. At the head of the valley, he made out the massive pile of a space liner.

They started down a winding path. The space liner disappeared behind a promontory of the mountain. Jonathan steeled himself for the coming ordeal. He would have sat down and refused to budge except that he knew the girls would hoist him on their shoulders and bear him into the camp like a bag of meal.

The trail debouched into the valley. Just ahead the space liner reappeared. He imagined that it had crashed into the mountain, skidded and rolled down its side until it lodged beside the stream. It reminded him of a wounded dinosaur. Three girls were bathing in the stream. He looked away hastily.

Someone hailed them from the space ship.

"We've caught a man," shrieked one of his captors.

A flock of girls streamed out of the wrecked space ship.

"A man!" screamed a husky blonde. She was wearing a grass skirt. She had green eyes. "We're rescued!"

"No. No," Ann Clotilde hastened to explain. "He was wrecked like us."

"Oh," came a disappointed chorus.

"He's a man," said the green-eyed blonde. "That's the next best thing."

"Oh, Olga," said a strapping brunette. "Who'd ever thought a man could look so good?"

"I did," said Olga. She chuckled Jonathan under the chin. He shivered like an unbroken colt when the bit first goes in its mouth. He felt like a mouse hemmed in by a ring of cats.

A big rawboned brute of a girl strolled into the circle. She said, "Dinner's ready." Her voice was loud, strident. It reminded him of the voices of girls in the honky tonks on Venus. She looked at him appraisingly as if he were a horse she was about to bid on. "Bring him into the ship," she said. "The man must be starved."

He was propelled jubilantly into the palatial dining salon of the wrecked liner. A long polished meturilium table occupied the center of the floor. Automatic weight distributing chairs stood around it. His feet sank into a green fiberon carpet. He had stepped back into the Thirty-fourth Century from the fabulous barbarian past.

With a sigh of relief, he started to sit down. A lithe red-head sprang forward and held his chair. They all waited politely for him to be seated before they took their places. He felt silly. He felt like a captive princess. All the confidence engendered by the familiar settings of the space ship went out of him like wind. He, Jonathan Fawkes, was a castaway on an asteroid inhabited by twenty-seven wild women.

AS THE MEAL boisterously progressed, he regained sufficient courage to glance timidly around. Directly across the table sat a striking, grey-eyed girl whose brown hair was coiled severely about her head. She looked to him like a stenographer. He watched horrified as she seized a whole roast fowl, tore it apart with her fingers, gnawed a leg. She caught him staring at her and rolled her

eyes at him. He returned his gaze to his plate.

Olga said: "Hey, Sultan."

He shuddered, but looked up questioningly.

She said, "How's the fish?"

"Good," he mumbled between a mouthful. "Where did you get it?"

"Caught it," said Olga. "The stream's full of 'em. I'll take you fishing tomorrow." She winked at him so brazenly that he choked on a bone.

"Heaven forbid," he said.

"How about coming with me to gather fruit?" cried the green-eyed blonde; "you great big handsome man."

"Or me?" cried another. And the table was in an uproar.

The rawboned woman who had summoned them to dinner, pounded the table until the cups and plates danced. Jonathan had gathered that she was called Billy.

"Quiet!" She shrieked in her loud strident voice. "Let him be. He can't go anywhere for a few days. He's just been through a wreck. He needs rest." She turned to Jonathan who had shrunk down in his chair. "How about some roast?" she said.

"No." He pushed back his plate with a sigh. "If I only had a smoke."

Ogla gave her unruly black hair a flirt. "Isn't that just like a man?"

"I wouldn't know," said the green-eyed blonde. "I've forgotten what they're like."

Billy said, "How badly wrecked is your ship?"

"It's strewn all over the landscape," he replied sleepily.

"Is there any chance of patching it up?"

He considered the question. More than anything else, he decided, he wanted to sleep. "What?" he said.

"Is there any possibility of repairing your ship?" repeated Billy.

"Not outside the space docks."

They expelled their breath, but not for an instant did they relax the barrage of their eyes. He shifted position in embarrassment. The movement pulled his muscles like a rack. Furthermore, an overpowering lassitude was threatening to pop him off to sleep before their eyes.

"You look exhausted," said Ann.

Jonathan dragged himself back from the edge of sleep. "Just tired," he mum-

bled. "Haven't had a good night's rest since I left Mars." Indeed it was only by the most painful effort that he kept awake at all. His eyelids drooped lower and lower.

"First it's tobacco," said Olga; "now he wants to sleep. Twenty-seven girls and he wants to sleep."

"He is asleep," said the green-eyed blonde.

**J**ONATHAN was slumped forward across the table, his head buried in his arms.

"Catch a hold," said Billy, pushing back from the table. A dozen girls volunteered with a rush. "Hoist!" said Billy. They lifted him like a sleepy child, bore him tenderly up an incline and into a stateroom, where they deposited him on the bed.

Ann said to Olga; "Help me with these boots." But they resisted every tug. "It's no use," groaned Ann, straightening up and wiping her bright yellow hair back from her eyes. "His feet have swollen. We'll have to cut them off."

At these words, Jonathan raised upright as if someone had pulled a rope.

"Cut off whose feet?" he cried in alarm.

"Not your feet, silly," said Ann. "Your boots."

"Lay a hand on those boots," he scowled; "and I'll make me another pair out of your hides. They set me back a week's salary." Having delivered himself of this ultimatum, he went back to sleep.

Olga clapped her hand to her forehead. "And this," she cried "is what we've been praying for during the last three years."

The next day found Jonathan Fawkes hobbling around by the aid of a cane. At the portal of the space ship, he stuck out his head, glanced all around warily. None of the girls were in sight. They had, he presumed, gone about their chores: hunting, fishing, gathering fruits and berries. He emerged all the way and set out for the creek. He walked with an exaggerated limp just in case any of them should be hanging around. As long as he was an invalid he was safe, he hoped.

He sighed. Not every man could be waited on so solicitously by twenty-seven handsome strapping amazons. He wished he could carry it off in cavalier fashion.

He hobbled to the creek, sat down beneath the shade of a tree. He just wasn't the type, he supposed. And it might be years before they were rescued.

As a last resort, he supposed, he could hide out in the hills or join the centaurs. He rather fancied himself galloping across the plains on the back of a centaur. He looked up with a start. Ann Clotilde was ambling toward him.

"How's the invalid?" she said, seating herself beside him.

"Hot, isn't it?" he said. He started to rise. Ann Clotilde placed the flat of her hand on his chest and shoved. "Ooof!" he grunted. He sat down rather more forcibly than he had risen.

"Don't get up because of me," she informed him. "It's my turn to cook, but I saw you out here beneath the trees. Dinner can wait. Jonathan do you know that you are irresistible?" She seized his shoulders, stared into his eyes. He couldn't have felt any more uncomfortable had a hungry boa constrictor draped itself in his arms. He mopped his brow with his sleeve.

"Suppose the rest should come," he said in an embarrassed voice.

"They're busy. They won't be here until I call them to lunch. Your eyes," she said, "are like deep mysterious pools."

"Sure enough," said Jonathan with involuntary interest. He began to recover his nerve.

She said, "You're the best looking thing." She rumbled his hair. "I can't keep my eyes off you."

Jonathan put his arm around her gingerly. "Ouch!" He winced. He had forgotten his sore muscles.

"I forgot," said Ann Clotilde in a contrite voice. She tried to rise. "You're hurt."

He pulled her back down. "Not so you could notice it," he grinned.

"Well!" came the strident voice of Billy from behind them. "We're all glad to hear that!"

**J**ONATHAN leaped to his feet, dumping Ann to the ground. He jerked around. All twenty-six of the girls were lined up on the path. Their features were grim. He said: "I don't feel so well after all."

"It don't wash," said Billy. "It's time for a showdown."

Jonathan's hair stood on end. He felt rather than saw Ann Clotilde take her stand beside him. He noticed that she was holding her spear at a menacing angle. She said in an angry voice: "He's mine. I found him. Leave him alone."

"Where do you get that stuff?" cried Ogle. "Share and share alike, say I."

"We could draw straws for him," suggested the green-eyed blonde.

"Look here," Jonathan broke in. "I've got some say in the matter."

"You have not," snapped Billy. "You'll do just as we say." She took a step toward him.

Jonathan edged away in consternation.

"He's going to run!" Ogle shouted.

Jonathan never stopped until he was back in the canyon leading to the plain. His nerves were jumping like fleas. He craved the soothing relaxation of a smoke. There was, he remembered, a carton of cigarettes at the wreck. He resumed his flight, but at a more sober pace.

At the spot where he and Ann had first crawled away from the centaurs, he scrambled out of the gulley, glanced in the direction of his space ship. He blinked his eyes, stared. Then he waved his arms, shouted and tore across the prairie. A trim space cruiser was resting beside the wreck of his own. Across its gleaming monaloid hull ran an inscription in silver letters: "INTERSTELLAR COSMOGRAPHY SOCIETY."

Two men crawled out of Jonathan's wrecked freighter, glanced in surprise at Jonathan. A third man ran from the cruiser, a Dixon Ray Rifle in his hand.

"I'm Jonathan Fawkes," said the castaway as he panted up, "pilot for Universal. I was wrecked."

A tall elderly man held out his hand. He had a small black waxed mustache and Van Dyke. He was smoking a venusian cigarette in a yellow composition holder. He said, "I'm Doctor Boynton." He had a rich cultivated voice, and a nose like a hawk. "We are members of the Interstellar Cosmography Society. We've been commissioned to make a cursory examination of this asteroid. You had a nasty crack up, Mr. Fawkes. But you

are in luck, sir. We were on the point of returning when we sighted the wreck."

"I say," said the man who had run out of the cruiser. He was a prim, energetic young man. Jonathan noted that he carried the ray gun gingerly, respectfully. "We're a week overdue now," he said. "If you have any personal belongings that you'd like to take with you, you'd best be getting them aboard."

JONATHAN'S face broke into a grin. He said, "Do any of you know how to grow tobacco?"

They glanced at each other in perplexity.

"I like it here," continued Jonathan.

"I'm not going back."

"What?" cried the three explorers in one breath.

"I'm going to stay," he repeated. "I only came back here after the cigarettes."

"But it will be three years before the asteroid's orbit brings it back in the space lanes," said Doctor Boynton. "You don't possibly expect to be picked up before then!"

Jonathan shook his head, began to load himself with tools, tobacco seed, and cigarettes.

"Odd." Doctor Boynton shook his head, turned to the others. "Though if I remember correctly, there was quite an epidemic of hermits during the medieval period. It was an esthetic movement. They fled to the wilderness to escape the temptation of women."

Jonathan laughed outright.

"You are sure you won't return, young man?"

He shook his head. They argued, they cajoled, but Jonathan was adamant. He said, "You might report my accident to Universal. Tell them to stop one of their Jupiter-bound freighters here when the asteroid swings back in the space ways. I'll have a load for them."

Inside the ship, Doctor Boynton moved over to a round transparent port hole. "What a strange fellow," he murmured. He was just in time to see the castaway, loaded like a pack mule, disappear in the direction from which he had come.

Robinson Crusoe was going back to his man (?) Friday—all twenty-seven of them.

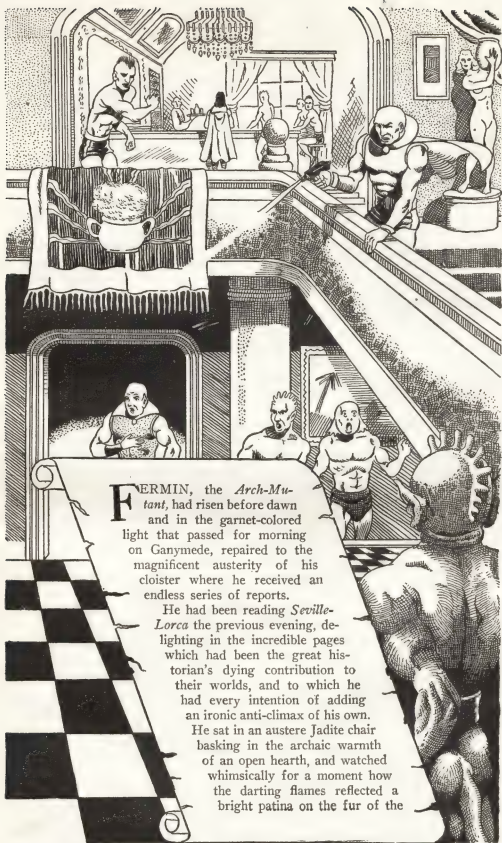


# The Silver Plague

By ALBERT DE PINA

Like a tide, the horror of the silver death was sweeping to inundate the inhabited worlds—with only Varon to halt its flood—and he already marked by the plague he fought.





**F**ERMIN, the *Arch-Mutant*, had risen before dawn and in the garnet-colored light that passed for morning on Ganymede, repaired to the magnificent austerity of his cloister where he received an endless series of reports.

He had been reading *Seville-Lorca* the previous evening, delighting in the incredible pages which had been the great historian's dying contribution to their worlds, and to which he had every intention of adding an ironic anti-climax of his own. He sat in an austere Jadite chair basking in the archaic warmth of an open hearth, and watched whimsically for a moment how the darting flames reflected a bright patina on the fur of the

somnolent Felirene at his feet. There was a chapter on the Jovian Societies he wanted to re-read. Not for the brilliant, facile style in which *Seville-Lorca* presented the distilled chronicles of the Jovian Moons, but for that deeper purport which is the notation of the heart.

Slowly, Fermin became absorbed in the photo-plastic record on the stand before him, unrolling in synchronized timing with his own reading speed.

"... It seems natural, I suppose, human nature being as it is—that the Mother Planet should maintain an attitude of supercilious aloofness. But then, it is axiomatic we can never quite love those we have wronged. And the history of the colonization of the major Jovian Moons is anything but exalting.

"When at the close of the 'Great Unrest,' as the twenty-third century is popularly known, it was definitely established that the ratio of Mutants to the grand total of normal populations was becoming an increasingly dangerous potential, they were given their choice of a charter to the newly explored Jovian Moons—a magnanimous gesture which ignored with olympic indifference the fact that at least one—Ganymede—had already a civilization of its own.

"The fact that 'Mutants' were the direct result of malignant rays and fiendish gases to which their ancestors had been exposed during the endless wars that ravaged Terra until the twenty-second century, thus damaging and modifying their chromosomes until Mutants began to appear in increasing numbers, was beside the point.

"**T**ERRA was not interested in 'origins' it was only interested in 'conclusions'—and that the sooner the better! For these silver-haired Mutants the color of old ivory, with the piercing silver-grey eyes, were a constant reminder of a recent barbarism, of fratricidal wars so damning that the new apostles of the 'Great Peace' would rather avert their minds. Besides, and this was the deciding factor, the Mutants' infinite capacity for intrigue bid fair to upset Terra's idyllic applecart!

"For in a world devoid of want, where strife had ceased under scientific control, where obedience was taken for granted, and robot-labor performed an endless variety of tasks, the blessed Mutants found

ways and means of fomenting discontent with admirable logic. Had it been confined to their own ranks, it would have been no problem at all, for as yet their number were negligible—scarcely a million. But the perversity of human nature is sometimes appalling to behold; thus, under the persuasive eloquence of the Mutants, great numbers of the population of the World State began audibly to long for freedom!

"What manner of freedom they longed for, was a little difficult for the World-Council to establish. For surely, in the face of universal plenty, freedom from want had been accomplished. Since the Government was a benevolent bureaucracy staffed by scientists, oppression was unknown. And, in the absence of need for labor, thanks to robots, anyone could and did pursue such bents and careers as best suited them, within certain limits. Even pleasure palaces; rejuvenation centers—and pleasures had been socialized. The Government furnished Cinemils, mild stimulants; even the more esoteric delights to all who performed a minimum of work per day.

"Of course, we now know (thanks to three hundred years of perspective), what the World-State failed to perceive: That human beings need not so much 'Freedom' per se, as the 'conditions of freedom.' For in a Social Order where everything is provided without effort, effort itself is hopelessly circumscribed. Where the 'Will to Achievement' is subtly neutralized by an established way of life, that precludes 'friction,' such a 'Will' becomes atrophied and progress stagnant. Just as 'resignation' is an inadequate word to describe the psychic exhaustion of a wounded soldier who contemplates with indifference the immediacy of death. So is 'exaltation' insufficient to describe the spiritual change that came over large segments of the World-State under the fine ivory hands of the Mutants.

"Fortunately, the Terran Government had the wit to sense an impending explosion that would have scattered their precious 'Peace' to Kingdom Come. Thus began the hurried exodus of both Mutants and malcontents to the Jovian system of Moons. The Mutants went first by unanimous decision of the Council. They demanded to be taken to Ganymede, where with a sigh of infinite relief (on the part of the World-

State), they were deposited bag and baggage. Then the malcontents were taken to Callisto, to Io, to Europa, and some even to one or two of those smaller Moons hardly bigger than asteroids. Even in exile, however, the parental hand of Terra followed its strange and wayward children.

"For we can suppose without fear of error, that the stately World-State Government felt much as an old and weary hen that has hatched a particularly bewildering brood of ducks. Deep in its heart, Terra felt a guilty sense of blame, and had anyone been able to reach that cold and battered throne, he would have discovered the angry pity and vast misgivings with which it undertook the colonization of the Moons.

"But as usual, they failed to take into consideration the 'Unpredictable,' that cosmic accident that recurs always in the lives of men—thus the World-State never even dreamed of what were later on to be called 'The Societies.'"

Fermin the Arch-Mutant paused meditatively in his reading, and wondered with faint amusement if *Seville-Lorca* peering from the summit of some remote Nirvana could see the stupendous drama that was being enacted in the Moons, and write on the spectral pages of a book, a new addition to his "*Annals*." But his sardonic reverie was suddenly arrested in mid-flight, for at his feet the great, golden *Felirene* had stirred with the preternatural awareness of the feline, its immense green eyes feral as it sensed. . . .

# I

"O Moon of my delight

That knows no waning . . ."

Terra—19th Century.

IN THE semi-darkness, the vast crystalline observatory was deserted. For the fifteen Tiers devoted to the feast, overflowed with celebrants who observed the three hundredth anniversary of their landing.

All Io seemed devoted to the chief preoccupation in their lives, and, had managed to make of an historic fact, the excuse for a planet-wide bacchanale. Julian Varon removed his black silk mask and stepped to the wide balcony overhanging the plains. The frosty air was like a benison on his

narrow, high-cheek-boned face, and the silence was a greater blessing still. Vaguely, he remembered the lines of an ancient poem of the twentieth century, which, by one of those ironies of Fate, had been preserved when far greater masterpieces had faded into oblivion:

"The brandy's very good—

*Blue space before me and no sign of man."*

Meditatively, he raised the fragile Bacca-glass to his lips and sipped the fiery liquor that Ionians distilled from the fragrant stems and leaves of the *Clavile* plant. For days, his mind had whirled in hopeless circles, and he wondered with a curious sense of detachment, whether he wouldn't be better off to leave the problem to the scientists. Only, it was his duty as much as any scientist, to search for clues.

Julian raised his eyes and gazed at the great tiers of stars that glittered above the towering, purple crags of the *Mallar* range. Throughout the hours of the Ionian night, the skies had been peopled by the singing of these constellations. But there had been none to hear it, for despite the ravages of the *Silver Plague*, the inhabited Moons of Jupiter had gone mad with revelry, as if they would distill the last drop of pleasure from each passing hour that brought them closer and closer to extinction.

"I wonder," Julian spoke aloud, "why decadence always hastens the tempo of pleasure!" He smiled acidly as his own voice sounded strange in his ears. Below him, the blazing tiers within the transparent enveloped, that was Atalanta, capital of Io, the great Galilean satellite, sparkled polychromatically in the night. In the utter silence, a stream of music faint and far away, like a tiny goblin orchestra reached him, as the icy wind plucked with elfin fingers at his cape.

And something else reached him, too, that sent the blood racing through his veins as his hypersensitive awareness of danger, translated the sound of stifled breathing behind him into a signal for action.

He whirled with a speed that was an index of Jovian training, for in the vastly lighter gravities of the Moons, his muscular coordination was breath-taking.

Before him stood a Mutant in the act of crouching for a leap. He was huge, squarely built, his silver mane standing straight out as he sprang with a murderous

rush. Julian stepped aside with calculated ease and his left hand moved like a piston into the Mutant's face. There was no time to seek the hidden "electro" under his armpit, and power-rapiers had to be checked before entering pleasure palaces. The Mutant bellowed with fury, and rammed a right deep into Julian's ribs, then brought up his left and Julian tasted the claret in his mouth. The silver-haired, silver-eyed being was obviously fighting to kill. And suddenly Julian's vast amazement changed to a cold fury that turned his blue-grey eyes to a smouldering black.

He slid two sharp jabs into his enemy, then crossed his right and felt bone give under his fist. He moved in, blasting with both fists like rocket exhausts, and heard the Mutant's breath exploding from his body. The Mutant with supreme effort tossed a fist grenade at him, but Julian had caught the rhythm of the battle and swayed away with it; he made the assailant miss again, then with all his dynamic power sent his right hand crashing home.

He saw the Mutant, face askew, slide drunkenly to the blood-patterned floor. Then cool hands were on his wrists, on his brow, and sanity began to return again.

"Darling!" Narda said in a husky voice that was distilled music, and drew down his golden head against a priceless gown that was all blue shadows and pin-points of lights, to stanch the blood from his cut lips. Her violet eyes were bright with unshed tears, but in the odd, slurred melody of her haunting voice there was no tremor as she asked, "What on Io's happened? Were you recognized by any chance? And a Mutant . . .!"

"Hardly think so . . . still. . . . Oh, forget it, this is not a night for problems. Did anyone ever tell you that your eyes are in Heaven," he grinned irresistibly with a charm that made him seem younger.

"No! None of your . . . what was it your barbaric ancestors called it? . . . blarney!" It was then she noticed the tell-tale silver flood at the roots of his yellow mane, and her heart stood still. *The Silver Plague!* Carefully she lighted a cigarette and blew a perfect smoke-ring into the icy air, she brushed an imaginary tobacco speck from lips that were like red roses. And when she spoke Narda was perfectly calm.

"I came to find you because they're going to play the *Ecstasiana* with a native orchestra from Ganymede—the muted viols and flute-like instruments, and those weird violins of that strange race. . . . We danced it the first time we met. Remember, my dear?" Her eyes were radiant as if all her tears were concentrated in her heart, leaving only their sparkle behind.

HE NODDED silently. He was too full of the racking knowledge that all his dreams had been destroyed by this alien malady that turned the hair to gleaming silver, and rendered them sterile. That, and his terrible love for this exquisite, gallant being who had consecrated her youth and brains and loveliness to the only ideal in the chaos of their lives—The *Dekka*. And as they turned to go, the tiny tele-rad on Julian's wrist began to flash a pin-point of light in a complicated code.

They both watched instantly alert, translating the urgent message with the ease of years of experience. The message was peremptory—final. They were to repair to the *Dekka's* ancestral Hall without delay for a plenary session. The laconic order ceased as the instrument went blank. Julian Varon looked at Narda for a long moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "We'll have to leave right away, it may be emergency!"

Narda nodded. "We'll have barely time to change in the spacer."

From below, the strain of the *Ecstasiana* rose to engulf them in a flood of melody.

She laid a sculptured hand on his arm. She was silent. She was waiting. The *Dekka's* summons brooked no delay. For this was no game of mere intrigue, but a gigantic fight instinct with the overwhelming drama of the unseen. The huge Mutant on the floor groaned and rolled to one knee. He had the strength and courage of a *Felirene*. He got up and rushed with scorn and hatred written on his features. He came with all rockets firing. Julian stood there in the battering storm and fought back. He dug his left into the flesh of the Mutant inches deep, then ripped a hook to his jaw. In the clinch that followed he could hear Narda's sobbing breath, as the Mutant's laces pounded low; he countered with secret, murderous tactics of his own. Then, he pulled the trigger



on his left hand, aiming with precision at a vital spot. He let it go. He heard the Mutant crash against the floor and lay still. Julian stood for a moment with his tongue on fire, his lungs heaving like bellows with the effort. He bent down and forced himself to search the man, but there were no clues on the giant.

FROM ABOVE, Atalanta was like a gargantuan bottle left behind by some god in his cups. Narda at the controls brought the intra-Moon spacer spiraling down expertly to a landing behind a concealing rampart of rock. Ahead of them a black, basaltic cliff reared its jagged crags, its boulder-strewn base seemingly impassable. Nevertheless, the two masked and cloaked figures hurried their steps toward the desolate barrier.

"We're probably late!" Julian observed. "We seem to be the last to arrive." He drew his dark, *Felirene*-lined cloak closer about him and led the way forward.

"Small loss if we've missed the preliminaries!" Narda replied. "I wonder how much longer the *Dekka's* going to wait? For fifty years Mutants have been appearing in our midst in small numbers—changed overnight, rendered sterile—and the scientists did nothing about it. Lately it has become a plague that threatens the Moons with extinction, and still we're fumbling in the dark! Oh, Julian!" Her voice rose in an ascending scale of grief.

"Don't move!" Julian whispered harshly and froze into immobility. He'd detected motion—something that had stirred among the boulders to his right. Instinctively his fingers groped for the handle of the tiny weapon under his arm-pit. No bigger than a toy-gun, its electronic stream was devastating at close quarters. He aimed it at the spot where he had sensed movement and fired as a darker shadow catapulted out of the gloom.

The spectral-blue beam of radiance from the weapon met the creature in midair and melted a jagged hole in its side; there was a fiendish scream of agony, then briefly a muffled tumult among the boulders.

"What on Jupiter was it?"

Narda stepped forward to investigate, but Julian stopped her. "No time now." It mattered little what manner of beast had waylaid them. The Jovian satellites,



even frigid Callisto, had teemed with life of their own before colonization by Man. And, since the Terrans had preferred to build stupendous cities within transparent, berylo-plastic shields, shaped like bottles, there had been small point in the systematic destruction of native fauna. The cities were largely self-sustaining, anyway. All commerce and intercourse was carried on by air. Only adventurers and fools would venture into the wastelands . . . adventurers and fools, and perhaps, members of the *Dekka*.

As they reached the base of the cliff, Julian glanced back at Narda and smiled. "Be alert, I'm forcing issues tonight . . . inaction's killing me!" He was like a Martian eagle—poised for battle.

Narda sensing his mood smiled thinly in the shadows.

She wondered silently what new, macabre mission would be assigned to them this time. And hoped that the summons meant something far more than the usual battle between rival Societies striving to milk the venom from each other's fangs. For on at least three major Moons, Io, Europa and Callisto, men and women were struck by an invisible foe that left them trembling with fever, and when that dwindled away, a tide of silver rose from the

roots of their hair, and even the eyes became luminous with the deadly patina. Nothing was known of Ganymede. It was hard to tell in the absence of reports, for Ganymede, aside from its own native civilization, had been colonized by Terran Mutants, who could and did procreate, thus perpetuating their race. But the victims of the Silver Plague were left sterile. It was hard to differentiate. Meanwhile the Moons were dying!

And yet, a stubborn feeling in her heart kept insisting that perhaps the *Plague* was something man-made, and like all poisons should have an antidote. She glanced at Julian and shuddered with anguish—there would be no progeny for them—her own turn might be next! What a fiendish weapon, if *it was a weapon*, she thought. The ultimate in refinement of warfare—a refinement that in their Moons had been going on for three hundred years!

NARDA shivered again, increasingly cold, as she let her mind rove briefly over their past history and their centuries of spurious peace. For nothing as crude as open, physical warfare disturbed ever the equilibrium of the various Moons. On the surface, the various governments maintained the most cordial relations—idyllic almost. But underneath—that was a different story! The most ruthless strife had never abated for even an hour. It might take the form of secretly systematic destruction of vibroponic farms of a world desperately in need of food; or perhaps the categorical embargo of essential supplies non-existent in another Moon. Or the proselyting of vast members of colonists from a sister world by means of economic lures. The loser always paid enormous ransom in whatever it was the victor coveted.

Thus the subterranean warfare was carried on by secret Societies, much as hitherto the Ancients on Terra had employed secret agents, members of the powerful "Intelligence." Only that on the "Moons," the Societies had much greater power than the *laissez-faire* governments themselves. Each Moon had its "Society," disavowed, legendary, invisible. They maintained secret armies of Astro-operatives and space navies always in readiness for *any* eventuality—or an initial *open* break that none of them

had the courage to be the first to start. But more important still, in their vast, secret laboratories, armies of scientists and technicians toiled ceaselessly on new techniques and inventions. Delved into intricate psychological data that was a miracle of ingenuity, calculated always to prepare as far as possible against the *unpredictable*.

The murmuring wind of Io swirled among the stones and laved them with its icy caress, and Narda trembled violently again. This time the spasm failed to abate, and she whispered through chattering teeth:

"Please, Julian . . . hurry. I'm chilled to the marrow . . . d-dear. . . ."

"You're what?" His voice was suddenly a rasping in his throat.

Julian straightened slowly from where he kneeled at the base of the cliff, where he'd been activating the mechanism of the concealed entrance with the wrist transmitter. He eyed the convulsed form of Narda then touched her burning forehead; he noted the tendons corded at her throat. A cold sweat of anguish beaded his brow as he said casually, "It is cold, darling," and then he punched carefully, precisely, and cried with agony as he felt his hand touch her flesh. He caught her tenderly as she slumped in his arms without a sound. He kissed her cold cheek and sought consolation in the fact that she would not suffer the first harrowing convulsive fever of the Plague. It would last for two hours. *How well he knew from experience the course of the disease!* And he hoped Narda would not come to before then.

Quickly he retraced his steps to where they had left the ship, and deposited her inert form in the control room. Then he prepared a note which he placed in her hand, it read: "*It was the kindest thing to do, darling. Wait until I return. There's hope.*"

He finally adjusted the wrist-transmitter to the exact wave-length required to open the entrance to the *Dekko's* Hall of Sessions, and raced swiftly toward the cliff like a disembodied shadow. In the distance a golden *Felirene* wailed its banshee love-call, urgent, savage—as savage as the burning agony that stifled Julian's breath, and as primordial.

## II

*"For this is wisdom—  
Not to love and live  
But to question what Fate  
Or the Gods may give. . . ."*

Terra—20th Century.

**"I** FOR ONE, have no intention of being sterilized by—shall we say—remote control!" The sardonic voice paused for emphasis. That would be *Astran*, Julian thought as he entered the great Hall, vast enough to encompass an army. The satirical tones were all too familiar; he had heard them many, many times during the years he had risen from a mere Astro-operative, through the successive stages of "Facet," Section-Facet Arch-Guardian; Techno-Star and finally had become Control-Facet, representing the flat, top-most facet of the stupendous jewel that hung above the Dais of the *Dekka*. "Dekkans," the voice continued, "despite my great age, I can think of less inglorious ends than to die impotent!" The flaming glory of the immense diamond cut in the shape of a ten-point double star, veiled the speaker.

"Perhaps we're not facing a conscious enemy at all—that is, none that we have been able to discover," Astran amended with a dry chuckle distilled of acid. "And believe me, the resources of the *Dekka* are anything but negligible! However, it may be that through a weakening of our race as a whole because of our existence under a different environment than Earth, we have succumbed to a microorganism native to these Moons, which originally were too alien to fit in mankind's metabolic processes. But now, now that through centuries of adaptation we have subtly changed. *It . . .* whatever it is, filtrable virus, microorganism, or whatever, *has had a chance to take hold*. All of you know the effects of the disease—hypertrophy of pigmentation glands—silver hair and eyes, as well as its one single deadly result—*sterility!*" Astran paused on the ghastly thought and let it sink in.

"Our scientists have been unable to isolate the germ, it must be a filtrable virus . . . that is their problem. But, if as I suspect there is a . . . what was it the barbaric, ancient Romans called it? . . .

a *Deus ex machina* behind it, then, by the perdurable glory of our Moon, gentlemen, I pledge a holocaust that'll dwarf Jupiter's Red Spot into insignificance!" The capacity for destruction in Astran's cold, dispassionate voice was awesome.

In the ensuing silence, Julian's mind trained to the apex of its wide-awakeness, felt the horror-vibration that swept the audience of Dekkans. He saw the coruscating streamers of living fire that blazed from the stupendous double star, and, with a feeling of shock saw that ahead of him an Astro-operative's mask had slid imperceptibly to one side, enough to expose a tell-tale *silver tide that had reached half-an-inch above the hair-roots!*

Casually almost, Julian moved with his strange, smooth elegance over the ethereal blueness of the saffiro-plast flooring, and the imperturbable gaze of his frigid eyes probed into the suddenly startled glare of the man. Without warning his hand flashed out and came away with the torn mask. A wealth of hair that had been tinted gold but showed unmistakable silver at the roots and parting cascaded to his shoulders.

The narrow face of the Mutant, with its thin, high-bridged nose and silver eyes, flushed crimson as he was exposed, and the long claw-like hand darted to his side, groping for the deadly Power-rapier that was *de rigueur*. All in one sinuous motion he lunged with the weapon that described a silver vortex under the fulgorant star. In the utter silence Julian, too, had drawn.

The breath of all present seemed to pause for a startled second, then their ranks split to give them room. There could be no interference in a duel, that was the law. There was courage in the Mutant, a fanatical valor that was mirrored in his eyes. He knew his life to be forfeit—and he intended to sell it as dearly as he possibly could.

**O**NLY the singing impact of the blades was heard, as the darting swords parried and cut, swirling streamers of unleashed power. And suddenly, the Mutant seemed to recoil upon himself, as if gathering all his reserves of strength, then he launched himself forward in a vertiginous fury of unholy speed. And that was his undoing, for Julian trained under Jovian

gravity could more than match it, and the Mutant staking all on speed, had had to sacrifice his guard. There was a soundless flash, like the glare from a gigantic glass, and where the Mutant's chest had been there was only space, space lit by the spectral-blueness of the Dekka Star. The body fell a charred and twisted thing from which the watchers averted their eyes. The peculiar odor of disintegrated flesh stung their nostrils.

For the first time in living memory, a spy had contrived to enter their midst. Julian didn't care to think what would happen to the units who guarded and activated the Neuro-graphs that were posted the length of the entrance corridor. Still, it was obvious that only a mind of great power could have had the satanic ingenuity to plan an invasion of the *Dekka's* Hall of Sessions.

Julian Varon bent over the mutilated form suppressing an impulse to retch. It was unmistakably a *true* Mutant from Ganymede, where the dark flower of their civilization had reached obscure heights. The features of the man were unmistakable. As he straightened, Julian raised his left arm exposing the tiny double star at his wrist, symbol of his rank, and belatedly reported to the *Dekka*.

"A Ganymedean Mutant, *Serenity*!" Julian spoke, facing toward the Dais where he knew Astran stood behind the veiling curtain of light shed by the diamond star. "This dubious honor is the second one tonight," Julian said with a mirthless laugh. "I've fought orfe bare-handed, the other with Power-rapiers, I should like the next encounter to be with 'Electro-cannon!' However, perhaps these two encounters are something of a clue. Surely," he paused and swept the assembled Dekkans with his eyes, "they must form part of a definite pattern."

"Please continue, Control-Facet," Astran's voice held a note of suppressed excitement.

"Simply that it has occurred to me, that while we on Io, the dwellers on Europa and even Callisto have been ravaged by this hellish disease, Ganymede has failed even to mention the scourge in their reports. Even taking for granted their genius for silence and intrigue—their aloofness from their sister-worlds' affairs, such a

catastrophe as this Plague should have blasted them out of their shells, *if they have been ravaged, too!* If not," Julian paused deliberately, and into these words he put all the dynamic, irresistible power of his trained voice, "*we should investigate, regardless of consequences!*"

"Investigate!" Astran's voice held a grim sardonicism. "If what I *intuit* is true, We, The Dekka are prepared to underwrite Jovian history for the next hundred years!"

Julian sighed with a sudden feeling of exultance, and he knew why. Wryly, he was aware that what Astran termed "intuit" was an integer of vastly complicated cerebro-geometric figures; graphs of brain-power coordinates and emotional integers, whose tendrils root-like delved into the innermost recesses of the human mind. And Astran was perhaps the greatest Cerebro-Geometrician of them all. Quite obviously the scientists of the Dekka had been far from idle. And, the expose of the Mutant spy had been like a piece in a jig-saw puzzle falling into place and revealing the beginnings of a pattern of some sort, but as yet not clear.

"Quorum!" Astran's voice rose imperatively. "Astro-operatives and Facets clear the Hall. All others remain."

The real session was about to begin. Julian Varon knew it all by heart. The endless series of individual reports on every nook and corner of their worlds, so that each member of the Dekka present would be acquainted with the sum total of their individual experiences. Still they remained masked.

A GREAT multitude of lesser members surged toward the exit, while those chosen to remain grouped forward under the flaming diamond star, whose light veiled the ten members of the *Dekka*. For the ten leaders of their order of whom Astran was the foremost, might be known by their names, recognized by their voices, but they were never seen. There was a saying that all others "could enter the light, but could never touch the flame."

All the waning night, while Io revelled in a fantastic carnival of pleasure, they gave their reports in minute detail, and the ten minds on the dais that formed the Dekka, made calculations with infinite pa-

tience and fed them to the Neuro-graphs by their desks complicated cerebro-geometric figurates were set up, and woven into the matrix of their problem. The possible influence of certain key figures in the Societies of other Moons whose intelligence, emotional stability and intellectual attributes were known, was reduced to high-level variables, and again fed to the marvelous machines together with the relevant data culled from the members present. Astran was like a raging juggernaut, asking questions, prodding laggard memories, directing the other nine members of the Dekka. He was tireless, and pitiless. How at his great age he could accomplish it, was a mystery. But it had been that boundless energy and stupendous will that had been responsible for the greatness of Io—not to speak of the Dekka.

*He must be over two hundred!* Julian thought with awe, recalling dimly the "Memoirs" of an earlier historian whom Astran had commissioned to compile a history of Io, and in so doing had managed to bedevil that poor man's life to such an extent, that the historian had counted the cessation of Astran's visits as among the compensations for dying! . . . That had been fifty years ago, when already for a century Astran had led the Dekka.

At last, the Neuro-Graph machines, marvelous as they were could do no more. Out of that welter of figures, endless reports and calculations, one master mathematical conclusion remained. *The answer lay in Ganymede!*

It suddenly occurred to Julian just how ghastly was the irony of their position. For their ancestors in gaining all the "conditions of freedom," had gained far more than they'd bargained for, including this epidemic of Mutations that in rendering them sterile sealed the doom of their Moons. Had Terra known it, this was the perfect answer—a few decades and all of them would remain only as a Mars-dry chapter in history.

They had sown the whirlwind . . . and were reaping extinction!

And Julian found a kindred feeling in the vast capacity for sheer destruction that Astran had hinted at tonight.

If the answer lay in Ganymede with its dual civilization of Terran mutants and their descendants, and the original Gany-

medean race, he meant to visit that stupefying world of cabals and intrigues and unrivaled luxury.

JULIAN stood alone at last beside the spacer where lay Narda's unconscious form. He glanced up into the ultra-marine skies blazing with myriad fiery roses, and gazed at the red ruby that was Ganymede reflecting the great Red Spot of the parent world.

Finally Julian entered the spacer and tenderly raised Narda's head to pour Sulfalixir down her throat. First he had to take here where she would be cared for, and then . . . and then. . . . With a sigh he took the controls and set the drive. In seconds he was soaring above the deserted plains.

### III

*"TERRA glances—Men bend low—  
As Death dances, on tip-toe!"  
Io—27th Century.*

LIKE A shallow bowl hooded in starlight, the secret Ganymedean landing fields came rushing upward as Julian coasted the muted spacer, descending in a great rush of wind.

It seemed deserted and bleak, coldly uninviting. There was a brief jar as Julian



Varon



made contact and brought the small but almost invulnerable semi-cruiser to a partial stop. His fingers were still over the banked keys when it came with mind-shattering suddenness—a burst of intolerable light! The spacer trembled, shuddered like a living thing. Instantly the hidden depression was alive with shadow-shapes as the first shot struck home. Again the livid-orange flare blotted out the starlight with a macabre radiance, and Julian reeled against the panel. He had time for but one thought: “Hidden! Secret, eh!”

HE PRESSED the stud and drove the “Drive” forward one quarter. The spacer reared like a mammoth stallion and plunged vertiginously into the mass of men and projectors, scattering rocks and limbs in a welter of crushed metal and torn flesh. The pandemonium of screams and explosions was drowned in the roar of the hurtling ship. The warm blood spurted out of Julian’s ears and its acrid scent was in his nostrils. The momentum had carried the spacer across the entire field before Julian could bring it to a stop. Reeling with the effects of concussion he drove himself out of the wounded vessel and into the darkness of the tumbled terrain. The city was very near, he knew, even if no garish brilliance heralded it. He had to get to it. . . . *He had to!* The “plan” was complete, and even if only one small phase of the plan were defeated, the whole pattern would have to be reconstructed and the element of surprise would be lost.

And then he realized grayly that an awareness of the Plan existed. Else how explain such a reception? Violence was out in the open now. And, the *Dekka* had not been the one to force the issue. Still, the pressure of the thought in his mind—the overwhelming responsibility of his task—was so great, that it drove him with cyclonic power. It lent wings to his strength as he covered the distance in great leaps, and was profoundly grateful for his Jovian training. The tumult behind him receded into the distance, became indistinct. But Julian knew that transmitters would be crackling with warning. His instinctive ruse with the spacer had worked like a miracle, but he knew he could not hope to have disposed of all his attackers.

They would be on his trail like bloodhounds in short order!

The darkness now was but faintly suffused with the shimmer of starlight, and great sections of the sky were blotted out. He came up against a solid barrier and realized he was in the city. Ahead loomed a vast shadow whose upthrust towers caught glimmers of faint luminescence.

“The Temple!” he breathed, and darted like a hunted animal into the silent sanctuary. He didn’t deceive himself that he would be inviolate, although that was the law; but it was a respite. Time to get his bearings in the damnable city of darkness and tortuous ways.

Once within the lofty nave of the temple, Julian took swift stock of his surroundings. It was illuminated with surpassing skill, soothing, caressing almost. But it suddenly struck him that the perfection of the workmanship had a double purpose—it served primarily to mask the impregnability of the place. It was a veritable fortress instantly convertible if the need arose. It had been built to withstand a siege!

Ahead of him was a lofty, jewel-encrusted altar. But no idol was enthroned there. No inscription even. Only the raging inferno of a miniature atomic-vortex held under control by some unknown means and enclosed in a transparent substance which he rightly judged to be an illusion, and was a field of force, in reality. There seemed to be no exit anywhere, except the entrance through which he had come. Julian had suddenly come to the end.

He searched like a trapped creature, his whole being convulsed by the urgency of his will, while the tumult of the chase drew nearer and nearer with desperate urgency he explored the altar. “*Surely,*” he reasoned, “*there must be some way the priests of the temple reach the nave!*” With frantic fingers he explored the gemmed surfaces, driving his mind to intuit the logical means of ingress not to speak egress. The chromatic shimmer of the gems blurred and merged together, formed curiously fantastic patterns, as his senses reeled through the after-effects of concussion. Imperceptibly almost, his probing fingers felt a slight projection on a flat surface. With a swift, jabbing motion he pushed in, and a circular section the size of a small

coin slid to one side. There was a thin metallic ring beneath. He twisted it, and the whole section large enough for a stooping man to enter swung silently inward. He hesitated briefly gazing into the dark aperture. He could already hear clearly the shouted commands of his pursuers, as the troops deployed into the branching streets. He entered and the aperture closed.

WHEN the golden *Felirene* sprawled on the fabulous rug twitched its plumed tail and narrowed its lambent eyes to slits of emerald fire, Fermin, the Arch-Mutant did not move. He did not raise his head.

The silver-grey eyes remained fixed, the slightly narrow skull immobile; outwardly, he seemed absorbed in the photo-plastic record. But the long, fragile finger of his hand pressed one of the gems that studded the milky whiteness of the Jadite chair on which he sat. Imperceptibly the jewel depressed. In the open hearth before him, a burning log of aromatic wood crackled and sent up a shower of sparks like shooting stars against the blue glory of the aquamarine glass columns that flanked it.

"The slightest movement means death!" Fermin said softly, in a voice that was calm and poised and unhurried. "Even a spoken word might set it off." In the brooding silence, the subdued hissing of the flames could be heard.

"You see, intruder, you're standing in a radio beam that controls a Neuro-flash. The slightest movement disturbs the beam, which in turn releases the "flash." A most deplorable accident. . . ." His voice trailed into a melodious undertone faintly etched with laughter. Then he rose and flung back the folds of his jewelled scarlet robe, bright as fresh blood, with a gesture of fastidious elegance.

"Come, *Sappho* . . . let us welcome our guest!" he bade the now crouching, six-foot-long beast whose formidable claws were bared. "This is a memorable occurrence!" He moved with an effortless surety remarkable in its economy of movement; there was something oddly regal and imperturbable in his stride. Beside him, *Sappho*, the feral creature, paced with a fluid motion almost like flight, its golden fur gleaming with firelight reflections.

Across an invisible, if lethal barrier they met.

Fermin gazed into the inscrutable eyes, blue-grey and silvered, almost like his own. He appraised the astonishing shoulders of the man, the golden hair with the unmistakable rising tide of silver. Noted the absence of weapons except for the usual power-rapier. "What a magnificent addition to our cause," he meditated. Unhurriedly Fermin retraced his steps to the chair, and depressed another flashing gem that shut off the radio-beam, then came back to the silent man. "How," he inquired in a voice like ice, "did you get in here?" Inwardly Fermin was torn between the desire to let *Sappho* display her peculiar talents, and that of adding yet another valuable recruit to the cause. He smiled slowly as if reading the intruder's thoughts: "It is safe to speak now," he pointed out. "I've shut off the power."

"My entrance is but a detail," Julian answered. His eyes traveled slowly, noting the shock of translucent hair, the silver eyes, then paused briefly at the power-rapier hanging from Fermin's belt. For a second he had an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh at the ghastly irony of it. After waiting for hours in the secret passage, he had to blunder headlong into the presence of the one being in all *Ganymede* he would have avoided at all costs!

"I sought sanctuary and there was the Temple-nave. It's inviolate, isn't it?" (*The point was, should he brazen it out or fight.*)

"Of course!"

"But obviously, I couldn't remain in the Temple forever, so . . . I had to find an exit. (*Wonder if the paralysis ray works on a Felirene!*)"

"Continue, please," Fermin's voice was a smooth purr.

"The atomic vortex drew my attention and I found beneath it what I sought. Then, when I came in here and saw you absorbed in those records . . . why, I hesitated. . . ."

"As simple as that." A world of irony lay in Fermin's pellucid tones. The smile of ancient Medusa, would have been mild compared with the change that came over the Arch-Mutant's face. "No doubt, it is also a mere detail that the Atomic-vortex—which represents, incidentally, the Ab-

solute—is absolutely fatal! That secret exit beneath the altar is known only to five other persons besides myself. And, that the slightest miscalculation in manipulating the secondary controls of the last door that leads to this chamber, releases an electronic current sufficient in itself to incinerate a squadron! Remarkable!" Fermin's eyes were flashing molten silver. "And casually strolled through!" The hooded eyes were shadowed with death now. "However," the unhurried voice continued, "*we expected you, Julian Varon.*"

"Yes, I am Varon," Julian answered with a sort of sardonic calm he reserved for moments when death loomed very near. "I am too near *the flame* to have dispensed with your attention. The point is, Fermin, I thought you a gentleman, while you seem to consider me a knave. I'm afraid we are both mistaken!" His generous mouth curved in a contemptuous smile, as the taunt struck home. Death was something the members of the Dekka had to learn to accept in advance.

FERMIN chuckled, if anything as vulgar as a chuckle might be said to issue from those chiselled, aristocratic lips, but his face was ashen as his hand grasped the neutralized hilt of his Power-rapier.

"My rank is higher than a Prince, Dekkan—I don't have to be a gentleman! My mistake lay in thinking that you might be interested in an offer I was about to make. After all, *you're a sterile Mutant now.*"

The savage Felirene licked its golden muzzle and gave a muffled roar as if tired of waiting, its prodigious musculature rippled under the metallic sheen of its priceless fur. Fermin stroked it caressingly.

"See, even Sappho has lost patience. I regret I must subject you to the Psycho-graph—that is, unless you prefer to tell me the reason for your visit of your own accord." The mellifluous accents were a study in modulation—clear, precise—sardonic.

Julian had a flashing remembrance of what a Psycho-graph could do to him. It had happened once before during his twenty-nine years of existence. He relived for an instant the burst of dazzling light, the agonizing fury in his brain, while voices that mocked and danced and probed penetrated deeper and deeper into his con-

sciousness until they became a searing Babel in his mind. Julian had vowed it would never happen again. Suddenly he blanked his mind with swift ruthlessness.

And with the same savage ruthlessness he struck. A tiny paralysis beam flashed from the ring on his left little finger and stretched out the Felirene without a sound. His right hand already had sought the Power-rapier and the flashing blade described a scintillant wheel before him. But Fermin's reflexes were quite as swift. His own blade leaped into his long, aristocratic hand, as he sought cunningly to back toward the Jadite chair.

But Julian didn't give him that chance he needed, his onslaught drove forward with appalling speed, slashing, parrying, probing like a living thing, until the Arch-Mutant's face went gray, shadowed by the first fear he had known in his extraordinary life. Craftily, the scarlet-robed Arch-dynast feinted to the left, in the secret Ganymede lure, and to his vast astonishment saw the lure engaged, *and then*, a searing flash that coruscated before his dazzled eyes left him only the neutralized hilt of his rapier in his hand! Fermin had a confused picture of molten drops spilling from the weightless hilt and of golden motes dancing before his eyes, when the paralysis beam convulsed him in a frozen shudder and he tumbled slowly to the rug—graceful even in unconsciousness.

Julian did not waste a single precious second. Both Fermin and his *alter ego* would be out for at least two or three hours, he knew. But his presence might be discovered there any moment. He searched the jewelled cabinets that lined one wall. Feverishly he scanned the photographic record on the stand, and even read the flowing hieroglyphics of Ganymede, so much like the written Arabic of forgotten antiquity, which he found in a special compartment over the hearth, and found . . . nothing! Nothing but a single word, frozen and faded in a now neutralized telesolidograph screen that flanked the white splendor of the Jadite chair. The word was "*Paradisiac.*" And that was the name of perhaps the most glamorous, and the most dangerous pleasure den in their known universe.

At last in desperation, he searched the fallen body unceremoniously. The jewelled

garments of the Arch-Mutant yielded no records, no secret notes, only a tiny vial fashioned of a single blood-red *Panagran*, which contained a colorless liquid. This, Julian thrust into a pocket. Then like a wraith he melted into the aquamarine penumbra of the titanic columns and disappeared as soundlessly as he had come.

Once out in the diluted scarlet of Ganymede's morning, he saw that the temple was ringed with guards. Most of them lounged in the careless sense of security that comes with routine. Julian, the pupils of his eyes dilating, slid along the side of one wall, there was only one guard there—beyond was a wide avenue somewhere along which the Paradisiac was located. He moved as quietly as a *Felirene*, as implacable as death. The guard never even felt the blow that felled him. Then Julian was sprinting madly as shouts rose behind him in the roseate gloom.

"Damn this pink fog!" he exclaimed through clenched teeth.

Behind him the muffled stamp of scurrying feet and the metallic scraping of power-rapiers became distinct; oaths and imprecations in various dialects grew loud.

HE SWERVED aside into a half-concealed doorway to hide his progress, for it wouldn't do to have his pursuers see him. A badly aimed power-beam from an old-fashioned heat-ray gun splashed off a wall not a block distant, in incandescent fury. "The fools!" he thought contemptuously. But his eyes scanned the buildings for a sign of the "Paradisiac." He was beyond fear—beyond emotion even. But what bothered him in a sort of dazed wonderment was that the word "Paradisiac" should have been frozen in the neutralized telesolidograph. For his assignment as part of the "Plan" was to meet another member of the Dekka, a Techno-Star, at the "rendezvous!" How Fermin, the Arch-Mutant had managed to obtain that information was incredible! It was an index to plans and forces he had not previously conceived.

But the problem now was to find the Paradisiac, he had merely a matter of minutes in which to seek concealment. And in this world of tortuous cabals not to speak of instant death, no blatant signs advertised pleasure, shelter or concealment.

The latter was an art that was subtly applied to itself. One either did, or did not, know where to go. Sanctuary was there for the asking—at a price. But the signs were only for the initiate to recognize.

Desperately Julian tuned in the secret wave-length of the *Dekka*, and turning his wrist-transmitter to full force, sent out in code a streamlined account of what had transpired since his landing, as a last detail he told briefly of his encounter with Fermin, and of taking the curious vial from the Arch-Mutant. It was then that out of the soft, roseate haze, a brilliant, varicolored pinwheel flashed briefly, then vanished as if it had never been, not fifty paces from where he stood. And Julian without hesitation was at the blank, beryloid wall in a few strides.

With his rapier-scabbard, he tapped a series of sounds, and the wall seemed to part, just wide enough for him to squeeze through the aperture. Behind him, the incredibly resistant plastic wall had closed.

In silence he waited, trying to control his labored breathing. Knowing that he was being inspected, and that the translucent barrier before him would or would not open—as *they* willed. The thought flashed through his mind that perhaps this *sub-rosa* stronghold of the Dekka, kept ostensibly as a pleasure-den, might have become tainted—a trap instead of a refuge. And in that brief instant of harrowing suspense, Julian became conscious of a presence, something cold and weirdly impersonal, that pervaded the cubicle with its aura. He shifted uneasily, poised with a grim determination. The blood-stained fabric moulded to his superb torso gleamed with the sheen of wet metal under the soporific illumination. There was no sound save his audible breathing.

After what seemed eternity—in reality seconds—the wall before him slid silently aside. A long corridor stretched before him. It led to the public rooms. The sudden shock of overwhelming relief had the quality of vertigo. The quadrangle walls seemed to lose solidity and become curved. He shut his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, the wall on the left side of the quadrangle bore a message in brilliant letters as if they'd emerged glowing from the plastic substance itself. It was a message and a question:

"PUBLIC ROOMS NOT NEUTRAL. DISGUISE DESIRED?"

Julian stared. Behind the silver-grey brilliance of his eyes, a mind trained to irrevocable decisions worked at the level of maximum awareness. His judgment balanced factors and variables. True, his instructions had been to seek sanctuary here, at this place, and on this street that for all its seemingly deserted obscurity was honeycombed with palaces fabulous for luxury and unlimited pleasures. Even the exotic tastes of jaded minds whose more esoteric interests could only be aroused by pain—the wild suffering of crucified flesh—were catered to.

Fugitives from half a dozen worlds lost their identity in the opulent warrens where "life" so often could be bought and sold with oblique indifference. But he had to visit the Public Rooms—his only contact with what he had come to seek *was there!* Someone who had devoted a lifetime to the Dekka, in Ganymede. Imperturbably he re-read the fading words, and with a mental squaring of his shoulders, he replied:

"Yes. Nothing *organic*, of course. But it must be more than merely skillful!"

Instantly the wall glowed again:

"THE SIXTH PANEL TO YOUR LEFT AWAITS YOUR PLEASURE."

**J**ULIAN strode down the hall and paused before the sixth panel, it opened inwardly with the same silent precision that characterized everything in the place. Thus far he had seen no one. The maximum anonymity was, of course, essential. Still, there was something eerie in the atmosphere of complete detachment. He entered and found himself in a circular room with curving, almost translucent walls. The floor was firm, yet resilient under foot. He felt like a fop at a rejuvenation center, and laughed suddenly at the thought. His whole countenance was lit by that rare smile. From somewhere a slim, completely masked creature glided silently into the room.

Julian judged its height at slightly less than five feet; however, beyond the fact that its body was undeniably human, and exquisitely proportioned, Julian was unable to go, for the being's skin-tight garment left not an inch of surface exposed

—except its hands. These were long, and marvelously sensitive, with a nervous life of their own as if they acted independently of the Ganymedeans' guiding brain.

They were measuring him now, taking in the magnificent breadth of shoulder, the long, flat thighs and narrow waist, above which rose the inverted pyramid that was Julian's torso. At last they carefully removed his helmet and paused as if appraising the great shock of golden hair. With a swift motion that took in Julian's entire body, the designer indicated that Julian strip. Again the exquisite hands repeated the gesture—impatiently this time—but Julian, his face set, still hesitated.

The designer was a native Ganymedeans, beyond doubt—Julian knew that much. But, was it a man or a woman? Julian was well aware that the exquisite beings of fabulous Ganymede, who even when confronted with the outrage that was *The Dynasty*, foisted upon them by the Terran Mutants had disdained arming themselves to the teeth as the rest of the Moons had done, had some very strange ideas about things. And the "Control-Facet" had no intention of disrobing before a woman—even as alien and anonymous a being as the Ganymedeans. His face was beginning to flush with sheer annoyance.

As if reading Julian's thoughts, the masked designer shook its head and made an expressive gesture with its hands, as if Julian's nudity would be a thing of such utter unimportance, that it would scarcely be noticed, except as a foundation upon which to achieve a superlative disguise. And Julian had no alternative. It was either disrobe or enter the Public Rooms as he was. Mentally he consigned the stubborn race of Ganymede to the most sulphuric region he could think of, and palming his electro-beam, undressed. The coldly unemotional designer was unable to suppress a gasp! Its ancient, long-forgotten Gods must have been like this; theirs was a cult of beauty, and in Julian it was witnessing a masterpiece. Almost, reverently, the fluttering hands began their work.

The Ganymedeans' artistry was very great. "*Part of their accursed stubbornness!*" Julian thought. For the Ganymedeans had an exasperating tenacity of purpose which brooked no obstacles until



they achieved their ends—it bordered on genius, or madness, or both. Had they devoted it to the art of War, Seville-Lorca's "*Jovian Annals*" would have been a vastly different story.

The space-tanned face with its slightly flaring nostrils, and large silver-grey eyes, crowned by the shock of golden mane, began to change subtly under the magical hands of the designer. Slowly the shoulder long hair took on a dull, ruddy sheen, while the coppered complexion paled and a temporary irritant brought a deep flush to his cheeks. With deft movements, the winged brows were darkened and narrowed, and the generous, full lips were pulled slightly inwards and taped with invisi-plastic, until only a thin, cruel curve remained. The Ganymedeian stepped back and scrutinized the effect. Quickly it crossed to a part of the circular chamber and then pressed a stud. A great section of the wall sank downward, revealing tier after tier of dazzling costumes already composed. There were gossamer silks from Venus, lustrous as moonlight pools; the opulent gleam of stiff brocades from Mars, as unyielding as the character of that supercilious race. Velvets like crushed petals, embroidered in *Starlimans*, the priceless green diamonds of Mercury; vivid fabrics from distant Neptune, which were not woven at all, but secret plastics worth a small fortune each. And, they were all green—in an infinite gradation of shades, nuances, hues. The artist's hands reached and drew forth a single garment open at the back. And then the real work began.

JULIAN'S eyes were inscrutable. He had not been asked what effect was to be achieved, or indeed how he wished to be changed. True, nothing of an *organic* nature had been attempted. But he was not used to this.

The Ganymedeian designer, whatever it was, was a great artist. Great enough to take liberties, or else possessed of the effrontery of genius. But then, Julian meditated, Ganymedeians were like that. There were times when one didn't know whether to slay them or leave them. Then it occurred to Julian that perhaps the instructions of the *Dekka* had been specific. But dismissed the thought with a wry smile. Even the *Dekka*'s instructions as to the

actual disguise would have been quietly ignored by this creature. It was a work of art, and in that realm, Ganymedeians listened to no one. But his meditation was cut short by the gestures of the artist, which clearly indicated that Julian tilt his head. In his hands he held a tiny bottle, and something like an eye-dropper.

"I said *nothing organic*!" Julian reminded him coldly.

"A tint, nothing more," the Ganymedeian spoke for the first time in soft, slurred accents. "It will only last a few days, then disappear. And, without it, the work is incomplete." Julian submitted reluctantly.

The artist was at last finished. One graceful hand motioned toward a huge moon of a mirror suspended by anti-gravitic means, and Julian turned curiously to see what the creature had transformed him into.

His astounded gasp was audible in the silent alcove. For he saw a tall, disdainful Martian whose violet eyes looked coldly out a face he couldn't recognize as his own; a mane of ruddy, curling ringlets fell to the neck-line, while thin, cruel lips curving slightly expressed unutterable boredom. For the rest, his body was sheathed in palest silver-green, of a texture like human epidermis—satiny, rippling with his every movement, while a great belt of *Panagrans* circled his narrow waist.

The Ganymedeian held up an expressive finger, then flew to a drawer hidden beneath the folds of the costumes. He extracted something and came swiftly back. Julian felt a sharp pain in his left ear-lobe, then the icy sensation of a cauterizer stanching the capillary flow, and something was fastened to his ear. When he gazed into the reflecting moon, he saw a huge, solitary *Starliman* swirling green fire from his left ear-lobe. The picture of a ruthless, interplanetary fop was superbly complete. Only a Neuro-Graph machine could possibly have revealed his identity now.

Julian went over to where his former garments lay on the floor, and fastened his Power-rapier to the jeweled belt, then extracted the vial he had taken from Fermin, taking care that the designer didn't see it, and secreted it on his person. When he straightened up again, the Ganymedeian was holding a cloak of rich *ocelandian* fur which Julian threw about his shoulders.

The artist gazed at him for a brief instant, with something like a smile in its brilliant eyes—all that could be seen of his masked face. Then as silently as he had come, he literally walked into a section of the paneling which gave way before him and disappeared in the endless labyrinth that was the Paradisiac. The door of the circular room opened soundlessly. Julian's hand flew to the electro-beam under his arm-pit, but no one came. It was a mute invitation to depart.

The long corridor led him to the balcony overhanging the Public Rooms. Below him was a hall so vast, built on a scale so great, that it imparted a feeling of limitless distances, yet he knew this was an illusion. To his right, a crystal conveyor spiraled down in a swirl of imprisoned waters, foaming like a rushing stream, while at the bottom, freed by the deliberately lessened gravity, the worst and best from all the inhabited worlds sat at individual platforms or revolved lazily in the upper levels. The enchantment of fantastic harmonies wove a subtle spell of desire and nameless longings. But although he felt the magic of the extravagantly honeyed chords, Julian reminded himself that was not there to propitiate the eternal caprice of the flesh.

#### IV

*"Within my heart, all ecstasy,  
Within my eyes, all visions dwell.  
Life—Death, I turn to rhapsody—  
I am the deathless Philomel.*

TERRA—20th Century.

HE SWEPT the assemblage with a glance. Purposely he had stood for seconds in full view. A perfect fop—as frivolous, as dangerous as anything the Paradisiac harbored. The ultimate in elegance.

Julian stepped on the conveyor and had the illusion of being borne along on a cataract of foam to where an immaculately garbed Ganymedean bowed and led the way to a secluded platform embowered in the geometrical interlacings of frost crystals. The panel in the table's center instantly suffused with softest light as he sat down, and a note like the echo of a forgotten song rang subdued.

"Venusin . . . undiluted!" Julian ordered laconically.

Mentally he enjoyed in anticipation the exhilarating power of the treacherous drink. It was precisely what a successful adventurer would have ordered there.

He waited calmly, conscious that he was the cynosure of many eyes. He knew a thousand dramas were being enacted in the sumptuous den, under the masking surface of convention and social intercourse.

The place was like a gigantic cup abrim with beauty—so much of it—in the decors, in the music, in the *flesh*, left him cold. A glowing core of contempt burned within him at the overwhelmingly seductive weakness it induced. Julian knew he had to be as invulnerable as beryll-plast—deaf to all the mellow dictums of the heart. He was here for one single, solitary purpose that was the all-embracing, the tremendous *now*. To meet a bearer of information so secret, so profoundly vital, that its possessor had not dared even transmit it in the highly complicated secret code of the *Dekka*. For that he had braved what he now realized was certain death. It was his task to receive it, and pass it through channels that would reach the ten Dekkan patriarchs.

Once more, as he had done when he'd paused at the top of the conveyor, Julian raised his arm and almost imperceptibly made the secret, inmemorable gesture of the *Dekka*. He was impatient. There was no time. Disguise or no disguise, he knew that any minute now, the Paradisiac might erupt like a long-seething volcano. *Why wasn't the person he was to meet here yet?* Mechanically his fingers groped for the vial he had taken from Fermin, and paused startled as he felt the unmistakable outline of something hard beside the shape of the miniature vial. He drew it out slowly, palmed so that no observer could discern it from even a short distance. It was a tiny plastic disc bearing the words: SUB ROHAN SQUARE. As Julian raised the glass of Venusin to his lips, he swallowed the disc, which he knew would dissolve. *He already had met the informant!* The thought was almost shocking in its intensity. It could only have been the Ganymedean designer! And yet, the message in itself was disappointing. What could there be beneath Rohan Square, the cen-

tral plaza before the Temple where he'd met Fermin?

Already amidst the perfect glamour, the seductive illusions of the Paradisiac, forces were gathering that no Ganymedeian art could dispel, and which were far from being illusory.

Neighboring platforms had drawn increasingly near; implacable eyes, devoid of lauguor or of drugs, gazed with cold intensity at the frost-trellised bower and its solitary occupant. The lighting effects of the Paradisiac had changed, dimmed to an idyllic, translucent twilight, while the music sank to undulations of the B flat tonality that were magical—plucking at the emotions with unerring skill.

A draft of fragrance—the heady *florestan* of Ganymede—made Julian turn his head. Up the brief stairs of his platform a woman was ascending calmly. Julian rose, a tiny frown between his eyes. He had not sent for a companion; then he remembered his brief flash of passion on the conveyor and wondered with startled dismay if these Ganymedeians went so far as to read the most intimate thoughts of their guests! But no, it could not be.

He shot a clear violet glance of keen appraisal at the girl. She was a *true* Mutant. Her utter refinement of features, the classical loveliness stamped with intolerable pride were beyond doubt Ganymedeian, as was the hair, almost crystalline, that fell in shining waves to her shoulders. The eyes, an enchanting shade of silvered blue, were smiling with a secret amusement.

"Shall one intrude?" The ghost of a smile parted her lips as she sat down, her priceless gown sweeping the platform with the crystal sheen of water. She threw back a shawl as sheer and fantastic as the Veil of Tanit must have been, with a gesture that only a very beautiful woman can achieve.

"Enchanted," Julian answered conventionally, but entirely without warmth. He offered her a drink. Maliciously he suggested *Venusin*, certain it would be refused.

THE GIRL let her glance rove over the wondrous spectacle on the stage that had emerged from the floor in the center of the hall, and, her smile was an adventure as she replied:

"Venusin . . . weaver of chimeras . . .

like all this," she waved an alabaster hand, "illusion . . . dreams. But even our greatest dreams *betrays* us sometimes. Yes, let it be *Venusin*!"

Julian wondered, straining all his faculties, whether the veiled warning were a prophecy of things to come, or the ironical skating on thin ice of the enemy itself! And was aware that part of his mind kept harping on the loveliness of this cryptic stranger. "*What was her purpose?*" *Had she penetrated his disguise? Was she there to make sure that under the miracle of art there was some one far more dangerous than a dissipated Martian fop?*" His answer came from her slender, fragile hands. *They were twining and untwining like lilies bending before the wind!*

"Let's dance," Julian said suddenly with an emotion he would not analyze. He rose and caught her roughly up to him. He saw her eyes go expressionless with surprise, she was stunned a little. And before she could recover, the irresistible power of Julian's arms had borne her to the greater anonymity of the dance floor in seconds. One moment the lyric quality of the atmosphere was part of them, and then the illusion was shattered as the frost-trellised bower vanished almost simultaneously with their leaving it. Lurid pencils of unleashed power impinged on the crystal table charring it, while the fragile walls disappeared under the barrage. Julian saw a burly Mutant searching for him, atom-blast in hand, while beside him another Dynast, his face stamped with the excesses of Vanadol slipped into the pandemonium the dance-floor had become.

With cold ruthlessness Julian aimed his electro-beam and saw the upper part of the Mutant's torso disappear. He saw the other one near the conveyor and the "electro" flashed again. The beam went through the creature and struck the great conveyor releasing the imprisoned waters. An icy geyser of liquid shot upward, and pandemonium broke loose. All the lights went out and madness stalked the swirling humanity that desperately sought to escape. He was in a maelstrom of fighting, shrieking beings and a chaos of noise as tables and chairs crashed.

"Let me lead . . . my eyes are conditioned to darkness!" Julian felt a tiny hand grasp his arm.

"So are mine . . . but who . . ." He could see dimly a tiny, slender figure, scarcely five feet in height, completely masked. Then he remembered the slurred accents of the artist who had achieved his disguise. The Ganymedeans already was scurrying toward the same direction in which Julian wanted to go, to the right of where the conveyor had been. Icy water already swirled around his ankles, and the babel of sounds had risen to a crescendo of unleashed fear, when Julian reached the plastic wall. The Ganymedeans was ahead of him, and Julian saw his press a spot in the smooth barrier. A draft of icy air struck his face as an aperture appeared. He dived in.



THEY must have traveled miles before Julian's Ganymedeans guide began to falter, then stopped. The being had silently ignored every question thus far, and twice had asked for silence. Now he turned on a tiny pencil beam and surveyed their surroundings. It was a cavern, musty and icy in temperature; great festoons of dust held together by age-old cobwebs hung from the curved ceiling.

The Ganymedeans went directly to a section of the rocky wall on the left, and searched the crumbling surface minutely with the pencil-beam until he found what he sought; he made an odd twisting motion with fingers pressed to the wall, and a circular section slid inward; beyond was another tunnel ending in a seemingly blank wall.

"You will find a metal disk in the exact center of the wall," the Ganymedeans explained hurriedly. Blast it with your electro-beam. It is the mechanism of a door,

the combination to which we do not possess. Be prepared to *destroy instantly everything that meets your eyes*—everything!" He motioned for Julian to enter the tunnel. "You will have only seconds to achieve your purpose. And remember, your life's already forfeit, so do not hesitate now!"

"But what is behind that door?" Julian asked, exasperated. "I have a right to know!" He laid a detaining hand on the Ganymedeans's shoulder. "*I must know!*"

By the spectral radiance of the pencil-beam, the artist eyed Julian with a strange expression in his eyes. "As you will, Dekkan," the being shrugged his shoulders. "You will find a laboratory . . . if you live to reach it. It is doubly guarded, although even the Dynasty does not suspect the existence of that door, for it is part of the remains of our own subterranean system. Beyond it . . ." the Ganymedeans paused, "in that laboratory is stored the blood-plasma of Mutants who have voluntarily submitted to *innoculation with a certain disease*. The resulting modified virus is the *Plague*. It's like a vaccine magnified a thousand times—its victims do not die, they merely become *sterile*!" The Ganymedeans turned toward where the corridor curving to the right was lost to view. "I go that way," he said simply. "My place is here."

"But . . . your message on the disc . . . you mentioned Rohan Square!" Julian exclaimed. "If I survive this, how can I . . ."

"*You are standing beneath Rohan Square, and the Temple, Dekkan!*"

And that was all. Suddenly he was gone like a wraith that melted into the darkness and the silence, his footsteps muted by the velvet carpet of dust. Julian hesitated no longer.

He found the metal disc in the wall, and with the "electro" at low power destroyed the ancient mechanism of the door. As if released from the bond that for so long had held it, the great section rolled back with a crash, carrying away with it a jagged section of plastic covering from its other side. Julian had a vivid glimpse of startled, silver-haired technicians who stared unbelieving at the strange apparition. In that dazed moment of inaction, Julian acted. *He was in!* The lethal

power of the electro-beam in his hand swept like a scythe through the group of Mutants. It was ghastly. The blasted sides of culture vats poured their viscous contents on the floor. There was a livid, billowing flare of incandescence as acids were struck. It was a welter of destruction and supernal fire that roared into the laboratory before any of the Mutants had a chance to act. The acrid smoke, the odor of disintegrated flesh was like a heavy pall. Through it, galvanized figures could be seen descending a winding staircase that led upward from the subterranean lab. The Guards!

## V

JULIAN poured a withering barrage at the plastic staircase, and saw it disintegrate into golden, dancing motes that merged with the advancing curtain of fire. He could hear frantic commands shouted from above as power beams crossed and criss-crossed the lab. The raging maelstrom was unbearable now, and Julian retreated toward the tunnel. Almost at the doorway a ponderous section of plastic from the caving ceiling struck him on the left shoulder and fractured his collar bone. He held his left arm at the elbow to support the broken clavicle and sprinted down the tunnel to the corridor. Muffled explosions behind him fed the cataract of fire. He pushed shut the circular section of wall and followed as fast as he was able in the direction he had seen the Ganymedean disappear.

The corridor seemed endless. Even his tremendous strength was taxed. Charred, the magnificent costume in tatters, his left side a gory welter of blood, he kept on doggedly, on and on, the unnerving fear in his heart—not for his life—but that he might not be able to transmit to the *Dekka* the ghastly solution of their problem. He kept forcing his legs, and was amazed when a draft of pure, frigid air smote his feverish face. He found himself by the shores of Ganymede's one and only shallow sea. Above him the stars were like freshly washed diamonds; the icy harshness of the wind was like a tonic.

He saw a tiny light describe a parabola overhead, and to his mind, inconsequentially came the lines from a famous poem:

*"And an errant star falls rapt and free,  
In the blue cup of the sea . . ."*

And then Julian realized it was no star. He followed with a vast unbelieving wonder, the tiny light winking on and off. *He knew that code!* Beyond he saw the tremendous looming shadows he had thought to be clouds. For an instant, Time stood still. Julian reeled with a surging wave of relief that was like pain in its intensity. Frantically he worked the wrist transmitter on his useless left arm, while waves of nausea rolled over him, receded and rolled again. He would never know how long he stood there, sending that long-repeated, incoherent message, until his mind spinning down the labyrinth of unconsciousness brought peace. . . .

IT WAS a universe later. The blessed peace of *Vanadol* had vanished pain. Sulfalixir was cutting through the darkness in his brain like a bright sun. Julian opened his eyes and stared . . . stared into a face that reminded him of tele-photos that preserved archaic illustrations of ancient Saints. It was hallowed in the bright patina of silver hair, but it was no Mutant, a virile aura of power shone in those intensely blue eyes.

The "Saint" smiled; the fact was illumined as if with an inner light. "Peace, Varon! There's no need to speak for we have the information. You gave it to us—piece-meal—I must say." He smiled with kindly humor. "But you gave it. We have synchronized and correlated what you told us in the transmitter before you went to the Paradisiac, and your later message from the shore."

"*That voice . . . that voice!*" The thought blotted out all else in Julian's mind. It could not be, it was incredible, and yet, no one else in his experience had just that tonal quality . . . those ironic overtones. . . .

"You probably wondered," the "Saint" was speaking again, "when you saw our signal, how the Dekkan fleet could be above Ganymere unchallenged. Look!" He activated a telesolidograph standing by the side of Julian's bed.

"Every inhabited Moon has its fleet here tonight, my son. When we flashed them the news you gave us of the laboratory where the *Plague* germs were kept, and of

# PS's Feature Flash

**FLASHING** you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

So let us present the Grulzak Chronicler, that connoisseur of corn, the king of comedy, and a—

## FIERY FAN!

Ahem. Clears throat. Hrrmmph. Gulps down glass of water. Glances around nervously. Takes deep breath. Begins:

Kennedy was born in the later '20's, displaying not the faintest trace of horns, tendrills, or other abnormal tendencies. His existence was utterly obscure . . . uneventful . . . no dash, no zip, no fire, no sparks, no nuttin' . . . until, that is, he discovered scientification. His first fantasy pulp was PLANET, oddly enough. No foolin', it actually *was*. This occurred early in '43. At any rate, the out-of-this-world stories in PLANET intrigued our hero (me). And forever after he has been unable to stop reading stf stuff. Nor does he want to. 'Tis as simple as that.

He admires Finlay, Lovecraft, and Leigh Brackett.

A quick switch to the first person. I've been in fandom for only a trifle over a year. Enjoy it immensely. Good ole fandom. Also love fanzines. Yeah. I edit *QX the Cardzine*, a postal-sized publication composed of SF news items.

Derive great joy from meeting and conversing with fellow fans. Never met a fan I didn't like, to paraphrase the old adage. Have done a spot of letter hacking. Consider the Viz top letter column. Can draw a bit. Cartoons, fantastic pix. Ambitions: To take a shot at writing; to publish a fanzine someday that'll knock 'em dead in the aisles.

My earthly body is six feet tall; weighs 2,320 ounces. I possess an array of brown hair and a portable typewriter. Ha. Glasses. Am stubborn, but detest stupid fan feuds and any conceit other than my own. Have lived all m' life in Dover, N. J. In fact, recently held a fan convention at my place, which was a fair success. The convention, not my place. Corn . . . Ah, yes. . . .

Tho my entire being is wrapped up inescapably in scientifantasy fandom, I frankly consider it but a pleasant hobby rather than something to save the world, idealize mankind, and make Centauri our vacation resort. I've as much faith in space travel et cetera as any one of PLANET's readers, but, cynic that I be, prefer to pin my hopes upon science rather than fiction.

Thanks, tho, for reading this. Adieu!

—JOE KENNEDY.

the incredible plan of the Dynasts—the Mutants, they came on at full power. Enough to blast Ganymede out of its orbit! The plan was the most fiendish, the most ingenious weapon of war ever conceived! You must have guessed it of course . . . for fifty years they infected our people in slowly increasing numbers, until at last they let loose the Plague."

"Narda . . ." Julian began as memory agonizingly came back.

"That is the name you kept repeating with every other word in your delirium," the stranger smiled. "A Techno-Star, as we found out. She of course, will be one of the very first to be given the antidote, Varon."

"Antidote . . ." Julian's voice was opaque with wonder, it was as if his heart had lurched in his chest.

"You brought it," the silver-haired stranger replied. "In the *Panagran* vial you took from the Arch-Mutant. Our scientists are already reproducing it. It acts both as an immunizer and an antidote. The Mutants had to develop it as a safeguard for the native Ganymedeans. It was the only way they could be assured of even their reluctant loyalty. And the Mutants didn't dare war against the Ganymedeans—they still possess ancient weapons that the Dynasty could not cope with. I wish we could obtain some of them," he sighed wistfully. "What a strangely stubborn race. . . ."

But Julian was scarcely listening, an upsurging volcano of hope had set his whole being afire with the immortal, singing flame. Narda . . . himself! . . . He closed his eyes against the tremendous psychic strain.

"Once more open war has been averted by a hair's breadth—I'm a little bit sorry, in a way, *Serenity*."

Julian opened his eyes startled. "*Serenity*? You mean '*Control-Facet*.' You are Astran, aren't you?"

"Of course, my son! *Don't try to tell me what I mean!*" He smiled with feral delight, then: "We're going to bomb the temple to its foundations—a mere token, of course. I shall have you carried to the observation tower. . . . It will be a welcome sight. Will you do us the honor of directing the routine, *Serenity*?"



# DOUBLE TROUBLE

by CARL JACOBI

**Grannie Annie, that waspish science-fiction writer, was in a jam again. What with red-spot fever, talking cockatoos and flagpole trees, I was running in circles—especially since Grannie became twins every now and then.**



Illustration by ANDERSON

**W**E HAD LEFT the offices of *Interstellar Voice* three days ago, Earth time, and now as the immense disc of Jupiter flamed across the sky,

entered the outer limits of the Baldric, Grannie Annie strode in the lead, her absurd long-skirted black dress looking as out of place in this desert as the trees.

Flagpole trees. They rose straight up like enormous cat-tails, with only a melon-shaped protuberance at the top to show they were a form of vegetation. Everything else was blanketed by the sand and the powerful wind that blew from all quarters.

As we reached the first of those trees, Grannie came to a halt.

"This is the Baldric all right. If my calculations are right, we've hit it at its narrowest spot."

Ezra Karn took a greasy pipe from his lips and spat. "It looks like the rest of this God-forsaken moon," he said, "ceptin for them sticks."

Xartal, the Martian illustrator, said nothing. He was like that, taciturn, speaking only when spoken to.

He could be excused this time, however, for this was only our third day on Jupiter's Eighth Moon, and the country was still strange to us.

WHEN Annabella C. Flowers, that renowned writer of science fiction, visiphoned me at Crater City, Mars, to meet her here, I had thought she was crazy. But Miss Flowers, known to her friends as Grannie Annie, had always been mildly crazy. If you haven't read her books, you've missed something. She's the author of *Lady of the Green Flames*, *Lady of the Runaway Planet*, *Lady of the Crimson Space-Beast*, and other works of science fiction. Blood-and-thunder as these books are, however, they have one redeeming feature—authenticity of background. Grannie Annie was the original research digger-upper, and when she laid the setting of a yarn on a star of the sixth magnitude, only a transportation-velocity of less than light could prevent her from visiting her "stage" in person.

Therefore when she asked me to meet her at the landing field of *Interstellar Voice* on Jupiter's Eighth Moon, I knew she had another novel in the state of embryo.

What I didn't expect was Ezra Karn. He was an old prospector Grannie had met, and he had become so attached to the authoress he now followed her wherever she went. As for Xartal, he was a Martian and was slated to do the illustrations for Grannie's new book.

Five minutes after my ship had blasted down, the four of us met in the offices of

*Interstellar Voice*. And then I was shaking hands with Antlers Park, the manager of I. V. himself.

"Glad to meet you," he said cordially. "I've just been trying to persuade Miss Flowers not to attempt a trip into the Baldric."

"What's the Baldric?" I had asked.

Antlers Park flicked the ash from his cheroot and shrugged.

"Will you believe me, sir," he said, "when I tell you I've been out here on this forsaken moon five years and don't rightly know myself?"

I scowled at that; it didn't make sense.

"However, as you perhaps know, the only reason for colonial activities here at all is because of the presence of an ore known as Acoustix. It's no use to the people of Earth but of untold value on Mars. I'm not up on the scientific reasons, but it seems that life on the red planet has developed with a supersonic method of vocal communication. The Martian speaks as the Earthman does, but he amplifies his thoughts' transmission by way of wave lengths as high as three million vibrations per second. The trouble is that by the time the average Martian reaches middle age, his ability to produce those vibrations steadily decreases. Then it was found that this ore, Acoustix, revitalized their sounding apparatus, and the rush was on."

"What do you mean?"

Park leaned back. "The rush to find more of the ore," he explained. "But up until now this moon is the only place where it can be found."

"There are two companies here," he continued, "*Interstellar Voice* and *Larynx Incorporated*. Chap by the name of Jimmy Baker runs that. However, the point is, between the properties of these two companies stretches a band or belt which has become known as the Baldric."

"There are two principal forms of life in the Baldric; flagpole trees and a species of ornithoid resembling cockatoos. So far no one has crossed the Baldric without trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" Grannie Annie had demanded. And when Antlers Park stuttered evasively, the old lady snorted, "Fiddlesticks, I never saw trouble yet that couldn't be explained. We leave in an hour."

SO NOW here we were at the outer reaches of the Baldric, four travelers on foot with only the barest necessities in the way of equipment and supplies.

"I walked forward to get a closer view of one of the flagpole trees. And then abruptly I saw something else.

A queer-looking bird squatted there in the sand, looking up at me. Silver in plumage, it resembled a parrot with a crest; and yet it didn't. In some strange way the thing was a hideous caricature.

"Look what I found," I yelled.

"What I found," said the cockatoo in a very human voice.

"Thunder, it talks," I said amazed.

"Talks," repeated the bird, blinking its eyes.

The cockatoo repeated my last statement again, then rose on its short legs, flapped its wings once and soared off into the sky. Xartal, the Martian illustrator, already had a notebook in his hands and was sketching a likeness of the creature.

Ten minutes later we were on the move again. We saw more silver cockatoos and more flagpole trees. Above us, the great disc of Jupiter began to descend toward the horizon.

And then all at once Grannie stopped again, this time at the top of a high ridge. She shielded her eyes and stared off into the plain we had just crossed.

"Billy-boy," she said to me in a strange voice, "look down there and tell me what you see."

I followed the direction of her hand and a shock went through me from head to foot. Down there, slowly toiling across the sand, advanced a party of four persons. In the lead was a little old lady in a black dress. Behind her strode a grizzled Earth man in a flop-brimmed hat, another Earth man, and a Martian.

*Detail for detail they were a duplicate of ourselves!*

"A mirage!" said Ezra Karn.

But it wasn't a mirage. As the party came closer, we could see that their lips were moving, and their voices became audible. I listened in awe. The duplicate of myself was talking to the duplicate of Grannie Annie, and she was replying in the most natural way.

Steadily the four travelers approached. Then, when a dozen yards away, they

suddenly faded like a negative exposed to light and disappeared.

"What do you make of it?" I said in a hushed voice.

Grannie shook her head. "Might be a form of mass hypnosis superinduced by some chemical radiations," she replied. "Whatever it is, we'd better watch our step. There's no telling what might lie ahead."

We walked after that with taut nerves and watchful eyes, but we saw no repetition of the "mirage." The wind continued to blow ceaselessly, and the sand seemed to grow more and more powdery.

For some time I had fixed my gaze on a dot in the sky which I supposed to be a high-flying cockatoo. As that dot continued to move across the heavens in a single direction, I called Grannie's attention to it.

"It's a kite," she nodded. "There should be a car attached to it somewhere."

She offered no further explanation, but a quarter of an hour later as we topped another rise a curious elliptical car with a long slanting windscreen came into view. Attached to its hood was a taut wire which slanted up into the sky to connect with the kite.

A man was driving and when he saw us, he waved. Five minutes later Grannie was shaking his hand vigorously and mumbling introductions.

"This is Jimmy Baker," she said. "He manages *Larynx Incorporated*, and he's the real reason we're here."

I decided I liked Baker the moment I saw him. In his middle thirties, he was tall and lean, with pleasant blue eyes which even his sand goggles could not conceal.

"I can't tell you how glad I am you're here, Grannie," he said. "If anybody can help me, you can."

Grannie's eyes glittered. "Trouble with the mine laborers?" she questioned.

JIMMY BAKER nodded. He told his story over the roar of the wind as we headed back across the desert. Occasionally he touched a stud on an electric windlass to which the kite wire was attached. Apparently these adjustments moved planes or fins on the kite and accounted for the car's ability to move in any direction.

"If I weren't a realist, I'd say that

*Larynx Incorporated* has been bewitched," he began slowly. "We pay our men high wages and give them excellent living conditions with a vacation on Callisto every year. Up until a short time ago most of them were in excellent health and spirits. Then the Red Spot Fever got them."

"Red Spot Fever?" Grannie looked at him curiously.

Jimmy Baker nodded. "The first symptoms are a tendency to garrulousness on the part of the patient. Then they disappear."

He paused to make an adjustment of the windlass.

"They walk out into the Baldric," he continued, "and nothing can stop them. We tried following them, of course, but it was no go. As soon as they realize they're being followed, they stop. But the moment our eyes are turned, they give us the slip."

"But surely you must have some idea of where they go," Grannie said.

Baker lit a cigarette. "There's all kinds of rumors," he replied, "but none of them will hold water. By the way, there's a cockatoo eyrie ahead of us."

I followed his gaze and saw a curious structure suspended between a rude circle of flagpole trees. A strange web-like formation of translucent gauzy material, it was. Fully two hundred cockatoos were perched upon it. They watched us with their mild eyes as we passed, but they didn't move.

After that we were rolling up the driveway that led to the offices of *Larynx Incorporated*. As Jimmy Baker led the way up the inclined ramp, a door in the central building opened, and a man emerged. His face was drawn.

"Mr. Baker," he said breathlessly, "seventy-five workers at Shaft Four have headed out into the Baldric."

Baker dropped his cigarette and ground his heel on it savagely.

"Shaft Four, eh?" he repeated. "That's our principal mine. If the fever spreads there, I'm licked."

He motioned us into his office and strode across to a desk. Silent Xartal, the Martian illustrator, took a chair in a corner and got his notebook out, sketching the room's interior. Grannie Annie remained standing.

Presently the old lady walked across to

the desk and helped herself to the bottle of Martian whiskey there.

"There must be ways of stopping this," she said. "Have you called in any physicians? Why don't you call an enforced vacation and send the men away until the plague has died down?"

Baker shook his head. "Three doctors from Callisto were here last month. They were as much at loss as I am. As for sending the men away, I may have to do that, but when I do, it means quits. Our company is chartered with Spacolonial, and you know what that means. Failure to produce during a period of thirty days or more, and you lose all rights."

A visiphone bell sounded, and Baker walked across to the instrument. A man's face formed in the vision plate. Baker listened, said "Okay" and threw off the switch.

"The entire crew of Shaft Four have gone out into the Baldric," he said slowly. There was a large map hanging on the wall back of Baker's desk. Grannie Annie walked across to it and began to study its markings.

"Shaft Four is at the outer edge of the Baldric at a point where that corridor is at its widest," she said.

Baker looked up. "That's right. We only began operations there a comparatively short time ago. Struck a rich vein of Acoustix that runs deep in. If that vein holds out, we'll double the output of *Interstellar Voice*, our rival, in a year."

Grannie nodded. "I think you and I and Xartal had better take a run up there," she said. "But first I want to see your laboratory."

There was no refusing her. Jimmy Baker led the way down to a lower level where a huge laboratory and experimental shop ran the length of the building. Grannie seized a light weight carry-case and began dropping articles into it. A pontocated glass lens, three or four Wellington radite bulbs, each with a spectroscopic filament, a small dynamo that would operate on a kite windlass, and a quantity of wire and other items.

The kite car was brought out again, and the old woman, Baker and the Martian took their places in it. Then Jimmy waved, and the car began to roll down the ramp.

NOT UNTIL they had vanished in the desert haze did I sense the loneliness of this outpost. With that loneliness came a sudden sense of foreboding. Had I been a fool to let Grannie go? I thought of her, an old woman who should be in a rocking chair, knitting socks. If anything happened to Annabella C. Flowers, I would never forgive myself and neither would her millions of readers.

Ezra Karn and I went back into the office. The old prospector chuckled.

"Dang human dynamo. Got more energy than a runaway comet."

A connecting door on the far side of the office opened onto a long corridor which ended at a staircase.

"Let's look around," I said.

We passed down the corridor and climbed the staircase to the second floor. Here were the general offices of *Larynx Incorporated*, and through glass doors I could see clerks busy with counting machines and report tapes. In another chamber the extremely light Acoustix ore was being packed into big cases and marked for shipment. At the far end a door to a small room stood open. Inside a young man was tilted back in a swivel chair before a complicated instrument panel.

"C'mon in," he said, seeing us. "If you want a look at your friends, here they are."

He flicked a stud, and the entire wall above the panel underwent a slow change of colors. Those colors whirled kaleidoscopically, then coalesced into a three-dimensional scene.

It was a scene of a rapidly unfolding desert country as seen from the rear of a kite car. Directly behind the windscreen, backs turned to me, were Jimmy Baker, Grannie, and Xartal. It was as if I were standing directly behind them.

"It's Mr. Baker's own invention," the operator said. "An improvement on the visiphone."

"Do you mean to say you can follow the movements of that car and its passengers wherever it goes? Can you hear them talk too?"

"Sure." The operator turned another dial, and Grannie's falsetto voice entered the room. It stopped abruptly. "The machine uses a lot of power," the operator said, "and as yet we haven't got much."

The cloud of anxiety which had wrapped

itself about me disappeared somewhat as I viewed this device. At least I could now keep myself posted of Grannie's movements.

Karn and I went down to the commissary where we ate our supper. When we returned to Jimmy Baker's office, the visiphone bell was ringing. I went over to it and turned it on, and to my surprise the face of Antlers Park flashed on the screen.

"Hello," he said in his friendly way. "I see you arrived all right. Is Miss Flowers there?"

"Miss Flowers left with Mr. Baker for Shaft Four," I said. "There's trouble up there. Red spot fever."

"Fever, eh?" repeated Park. "That's a shame. Is there anything I can do?"

"Tell me," I said, "has your company had any trouble with this plague?"

"A little. But up until yesterday the fever's been confined to the other side of the Baldric. We had one partial case, but my chemists gave the chap an antitoxin that seems to have worked. Come to think of it, I might drive over to Shaft Four and give Jimmy Baker the formula. I haven't been out in the Baldric for years, but if you didn't have any trouble, I shouldn't either."

We exchanged a few more pleasantries, and then he rang off. In exactly an hour I went upstairs to the visiscreen room.

Then once more I was directly behind my friends, listening in on their conversation. The view through the windscreen showed an irregular array of flagpole trees, with the sky dotted by high-flying cockatoos.

"There's an eyrie over there," Jimmy Baker was saying. "We might as well camp beside it."

MOMENTS later a rude circle of flagpole trees loomed ahead. Across the top of them was stretched a translucent web. Jimmy and Grannie got out of the car and began making camp. Xartal remained in his seat. He was drawing pictures on large pieces of pasteboard, and as I stood there in the visiscreen room, I watched him.

There was no doubt about it, the Martian was clever. He would make a few rapid lines on one of the pasteboards, rub it a little to get the proper shading and

then go on to the next. In swift rotation likenesses of Ezra Karn, of myself, of Jimmy Baker, and of Antlers Park took form.

Ezra spoke over my shoulder. "He's doing scenes for Grannie's new book," he said. "The old lady figures on using the events here for a plot. *Look at that damned nosy bird!*"

A silver cockatoo had alighted on the kite car and was surveying curiously Xartal's work. As each drawing was completed, the bird scanned it with rapt attention. Abruptly it flew to the top of the eyrie, where it seemed to be having a consultation with its bird companions.

And then abruptly it happened. The cockatoos took off in mass flight. A group of Earth people suddenly materialized on the eyrie, talking and moving about as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

With a shock I saw the likeness of myself; I saw Ezra Karn; and I saw the image of Jimmy Baker.

The *real* Jimmy Baker stood next to Grannie, staring up at this incredible mirage. Grannie let out a whoop. "I've got it!" she said. "Those things we see up there are nothing more than mental images. They're Xartal's drawings!"

"DON'T you see," the lady continued. "Everything that Xartal put on paper has been seen by one or more of these cockatoos. The cockatoos are like Earth parrots all right, but not only have they the power of copying speech, they also have the ability to recreate a mental image of what they have seen. In other words their brains form a powerful photographic impression of the object. That impression is then transmitted simultaneously in telepathic wavelengths to common foci. That eyrie might be likened to a cinema screen, receiving brain vibrations from a hundred different sources that blend into the light field to form what are apparently three-dimensional images."

The Larynx manager nodded slowly. "I see," he said. "But why don't the birds reconstruct images from the actual person. Why use drawings?"

"Probably because the drawings are exaggerated in certain details and made a greater impression on their brains," Grannie replied.

Up on the eyrie a strange performance was taking place. The duplicate of Grannie Annie was bowing to the duplicate of Jimmy Baker, and the image of Ezra Karn was playing leap frog with the image of Antlers Park.

Then abruptly the screen before me blurred and went blank.

"Sorry," the operator said. "I've used too much power already. Have to give the generators a chance to build it up again."

Nodding, I turned and motioned to Karn. We went back downstairs.

"That explains something at any rate," the old prospector said. "But how about that Red spot fever?"

On Jimmy Baker's desk was a large file marked: FEVER VICTIMS. I opened it and found it contained the case histories of those men who had been attacked by the strange malady.

Reading them over, I was struck by one detail. Each patient had received the first symptoms, not while working in the mines, but while sleeping or lounging in the barracks.

Five minutes later Karn and I were striding down a white ramp that led to the nearest barracks. The building came into sight, a low rectangular structure, domeroofed to withstand the violent winds.

Inside double tiers of bunks stretched along either wall. In those bunks some thirty men lay sleeping.

The far wall was taken up by a huge window of denovo-quartz. As I stood there, something suddenly caught Ezra Karn's eye. He began to walk toward that window.

"Look here," he said.

Six feet up on that window a small almost imperceptible button of dull metal had been wedged into an aperture cut in the quartz. The central part of the button appeared to be a powerful lens of some kind, and as I seized it and pulled it loose, I felt the hum of tiny clock work.

All at once I had it! Red spot fever. Heat fever from the infra-red rays of Jupiter's great spot. Someone had constructed this lens to concentrate and amplify the power of those rays. The internal clockwork served a double purpose. It opened a shutter, and it rotated the lens slowly so that it played for a time on each of the sleeping men.

I slid the metal button in my pocket and



left the barracks at a run. Back in the visiscreen room, I snapped to the operator:

"Turn it on!"

The kite car swam into view in the screen above the instrument panel. I stared with open eyes. Jimmy Baker no longer was in the car, nor was Xartal, the Martian. Grannie Annie was there, but seated at the controls was Antlers Park, the manager of Interstellar Voice.

EZRA KARN jabbed my elbow. "Grannie's coming back. I thought she'd be getting sick of this blamed moon."

It didn't make sense. In all the years I'd known Annabella C. Flowers, never yet had I seen her desert a case until she had woven the clues and facts to a logical conclusion.

"Ezra," I said, "we're going to drive out and meet them. There's something screwy here."

Ten minutes later in another kite car we were driving at a fast clip through the powdery sands of the Baldric. And before long we saw another car approaching.

It was Grannie. As the car drew up alongside I saw her sitting in her prim way next to Antlers Park. Park said:

"We left the others at the mine. Miss Flowers is going back with me to my offices to help me improve the formula for that new antitoxin."

He waved his hand, and the car moved off. I watched it as it sped across the desert, and a growing suspicion began to form in my mind. Then, like a knife thrust, the truth struck me.

"Ezra!" I yelled, swinging the car. "That wasn't Grannie! *That was one of those damned cockatoo images.* We've got to catch him."

The other car was some distance ahead now. Park looked back and saw us following. He did something to the kite wire, and his car leaped ahead.

I threw the speed indicator hard over. Our kite was a huge box affair with a steady powerful pull to the connecting wire. Park's vehicle was drawn by a flat triangular kite that dove and fluttered with each variance of the wind. Steadily we began to close in.

The manager of Interstellar Voice turned again, and something glinted in his hand. There was a flash of purple flame, and a

round hole appeared in our windscreen inches above Karn's head.

"Heat gun!" Ezra yelled.

Now we were rocketing over the sand dunes, winding in and out between the flagpole trees. I had to catch that car I told myself. Grannie Annie's very life might be at stake, not to mention the lives of hundreds of mine workers. Again Park took aim and again a hole shattered our windscreen.

The wind shifted and blew from another quarter. The box kite soared, but the triangular kite faltered. Taking advantage of Park's loss of speed, I raced alongside.

The I. V. manager lifted his weapon frantically. But before he could use it a third time, Ezra Karn had whipped a lariat from his belt and sent it coiling across the intervening space.

The thong yanked tight about the manager's throat. Park did the only thing he could do. He shut off power, and the two cars coasted to a halt. Then I was across in the other seat, wrenching the weapon free from his grasp.

"What have you done with Miss Flowers?" I demanded.

The manager's eyes glittered with fear as he saw my finger tense on the trigger. Weakly he lifted an arm and pointed to the northwest.

"Val-ley. Thir-ty miles. Entrance hidden by wall of . . . flagpole trees."

I LEAPED into the driver's seat and gave the kite its head. And now the country began to undergo a subtle change. The trees seemed to group themselves in a long flanking corridor in a northwesterly direction, as if to hide some secret that lay beyond. Twice I attempted to penetrate that wall, only to find my way blocked by those curious growths.

Then a corridor opened before me; a mile forward and the desert began again. But it was a new desert this time: the sand packed hard as granite, the way ahead utterly devoid of vegetation. In the distance black bulging hills extended to right and left, with a narrow chasm or doorway between.

I headed for that entrance, and when I reached it, I shut off power with an exclamation of astonishment.

There was a huge chair-shaped rock there, and seated upon it was Grannie Annie. She had a tablet in her hands, and she was writing.

"Grannie!" I yelled. "What're you doing here? Where's Mr. Baker?"

She rose to her feet and clambered down the rock.

"Getting back Jimmy's mine laborers," she said, a twinkle in her eyes. "I see you've got Antlers Park. I'm glad of that. It saves me a lot of trouble." She took off her spectacles and wiped them on her sleeve. "Don't look so fuddled, Billy-boy. Come along, and I'll show you."

She led the way through the narrow passage into the valley. A deep gorge, it was, with the black sheer cliffs on either side pressing close. Ten feet forward, I stopped short, staring in amazement.

Advancing toward me like a column of infantry came a long line of Larynx miners. They walked slowly, looking straight ahead, moving down the center of the gorge toward the entrance.

But there was more! A kite car was drawn up to the side. The windscreen had been removed, and mounted on the hood was a large bullet-like contrivance that looked not unlike a search lamp. A blinding shaft of bluish radiance spewed from its open end. Playing it back and forth upon the marching men were Jimmy Baker and Xartal, the Martian.

"Ultra violet," Grannie Annie explained. "The opposite end of the vibratory scale and the only thing that will combat the infra-red rays that cause red spot fever. Those men won't stop walking until they've reached Shaft Four."

Grannie Annie told her story during the long ride back to Shaft Four. We drove slowly, keeping the line of marching Larynx miners always ahead of us.

Jimmy Baker had struck a new big lode of Acoustix, a lode which if worked successfully would see *Larynx Incorporated* become a far more powerful exporting concern than *Interstellar Voice*. Antlers Park didn't want that.

It was he or his agents who placed those lens buttons in the Larynx barracks. *For he knew that just as Jupiter's great spot was responsible for a climate and atmosphere suitable for an Earthman on this*

*Eighth Moon, so also was that spot a deadly power in itself, capable when its rays were concentrated of causing a fatal sickness.*

Then suddenly becoming fearful of Grannie's prying, Antlers Park strove to head her off before she reached Shaft Four.

He did head her off and managed to lure her and Baker and Xartal into the Shaft barracks where they would be exposed to the rays from the lens button. But Grannie only pretended to contract the plague.

Park then attempted to outwit Ezra Karn and me by returning in Jimmy Baker's kite car with a cockatoo image of Grannie.

I LISTENED to all this in silence. "But," I said when she had finished, "how did Park manage to have that image created and why did the mine laborers walk out into the Baldric when they contracted the fever?"

Grannie Annie frowned. "I'm not sure I can answer the first of those questions," she replied. "You must remember Antlers Park has been on this moon five years and during that time he must have acquainted himself with many of its secrets. Probably he learned long ago just what to do to make a cockatoo create a mental image.

"As for the men going out into the Baldric, that was more of Park's diabolical work. In the walls of the barracks besides those lens buttons were also miniature electro-hypnotic plates, with the master controlling unit located in that valley. Park knew that when the miners were in a drugged condition from the effects of the fever they would be susceptible to the machine's lure. . . . And now, Billy-boy, are you coming with me?"

"Coming with you?" I repeated. "Where?"

The old lady lit a cigarette. "Pluto maybe," she said. "There's a penal colony there, you know, and that ought to tie in nicely with a new crime story. I can see it now . . . prison break, stolen rocket ship, fugitives lurking in the interplanetary lanes. . . ."

"Grannie," I laughed. "You're incorrigible!"

# DEATH STAR

By TOM PACE

**Trapped by the most feared of space pirates Devil Garrett, Starrett Blade was fighting for his life. Weaponless, his ship gone, he was pinning his hopes on a girl—who wanted him dead.**



Illustration by KIEMLE

**S**TARRETT BLADE crouched in the rocks by the tiny Centaurian lake. It was only about two or three hundred feet across, but probably thousands of feet deep. This lake, and hundreds of

others like it, were the only things to break the monotony of the flat, rocky surface of Alpha Centauri III—called the most barren planet in space.

Ten minutes ago, Star Blade's ship had

spun into the stagnant waters before him. An emergency release had flung the air-lock doors open, and the air pressure had flung Star out. And now he was waiting for Devil Garrett to come down to the water's edge to search for him.

For eight years, Devil Garrett had been the top space pirate in the void. For a year, Star himself had personally been hunting him. And on a tour over Alpha III, a Barden energy-beam had stabbed up at Blade's ship, and Star Blade had crashed into the lake.

That Barden Beam had Star worried and puzzled. It took a million volts of power for a split-second flash of the beam. Garrett didn't have an atomics plant on Alpha III—if he had, escaping rays would point it out, no matter how well it was camouflaged. There was no water power, for there was no running water. There were only the lakes . . . and tidal power was out, for Alpha III had no moon.

However, that could wait. Star slid the electron knife from his water-proof sheath, gripped it firmly. He could hear quick footsteps as a man came down the trail that led directly past his hiding place.

It wasn't Garrett, which was disappointing. But it was one of his men, and he was heavily armed. That didn't worry Star.

His fighting had earned Starrett Blade the nickname of "Death Star."

The man walked to the water's edge, and peered out over the pool. He saw the bubbles that were coming up from the sinking ship, and he nodded, grunted in satisfaction, and started to turn back.

Star landed on him, knocking him sprawling on the rock. The pirate jerked up an arm, holding the jet-gun.

The stabbing lance of blue fire cracked from the electron knife, dug into the man's heart.

Star tossed the dead pirate's cloak over his shoulders, and thrust both electron blade and jet-gun into his belt. He straightened, and saw the leveled gun from the corner of his eye.

He got the jet in his right hand, the knife in his left, and went into a dive that flipped him behind a rock. The three actions took only a split-second, and the blast from the jet-gun flaked rock where he had been standing.

While a jet-gun is the most deadly weapon known, you have to press a loading stud to slide another blast-capsule into place. Death Star knew this very well. So he knew he was safe in coming up from behind the spur of stone to fire his own gun.

If his reflexes hadn't been as quick as they were, he would have blasted the girl.

HE STOPPED, and stood for a second, staring at the girl. She was something to invite stares, too. In the moment that lasted between her next move, he had time to register that she was about five feet five tall, black-haired—the kind of black hair that looks like silken spun darkness—dark-eyed, and possessing both a face and a form that would make anyone stop and gulp.

Then the moment of half-awed survey was over, and she leveled the jet on him, and said in a trembling voice, "Drop those weapons, or I'll blast you . . . *pirate!*"

Death Star said, "That jet-gun is empty. I can see the register on the magazine. And I'm not a pirate. I'm Starrett Blade."

The useless jet-gun slid out of the girl's hand, and she gave a half-gasp. "Starrett Blade! I—I don't believe . . ." she broke off abruptly. "So you're Death Star! A fine story for a hired killer, a pirate."

Star reddened. "Look," he snapped, "I don't know who's been talking to you, but . . ." he whirled, and his hand whipped the jet-gun from his belt. As he did so, the girl jerked up the jet-gun she had dropped, and flung it with all her strength. The blow landed on his arm and side, and paralyzed him long enough for the man who had leaped out behind him to land a stunning blow against his head. As Star went down, he dizzily cursed himself for becoming interested in the argument with the girl, so that he did not heed his reflexes in time . . . and dimly, he wondered why it had seemed so important to convince the lovely dark-haired girl.

Then a bit of the cosmos seemed to fall on Star's head, and he was hurled into blackness.

An eternity seemed to pass.

Deep in the blackness, a light was born. It leaped toward him, a far-away comet rocketing along, coming from some

far, unknown corner of the galaxy. It became a flaming sun in a gray-green space, and strangely, there seemed to be several odd planets circling about the sun. Some of them were vast pieces of queer electronic machinery. Some were vague, villainous-looking men. One was the dark-haired girl, and there was lovely contempt in her dark-star pools of eyes.

Then into the midst of this queer universe, there swam a new planet. It was the face of a man, and the man was Devil Garrett.

That brought Star up, out of his daze, onto his feet as though he had been doused with cold water. He stood there, not staring, just looking at Garrett.

The most famous killer in the void was big. He was six feet three, and twice as strong as he looked. He wore a huge high-velocity jet-gun, and a set of electron knives, all of the finest workmanship. He was sitting on a laboratory chair of steel, and the chair bent slightly under his great weight.

He smiled at Starr, and there was a touch of hell in the smile. He said, "Ah, Mr. Garrett."

Star's jaw dropped. "Garrett? What do you—" he broke off. A glance at the girl told him what the purpose was.

"Look, Mr. Devil Garrett," said the pirate, still smiling softly, "Miss Hinton is aware of your identity. There is no need to attempt to fool us. . . . I've known it was you ever since I flashed that beam at your ship. And you needn't flatter yourself that the Devil's luck is going to hold out as far as you are concerned. For in a very short while, I'm going to have you executed . . . before a stellar vision screen, connected with Section Void Headquarters! I wish the authorities to see Devil Garrett die, so that I might collect the reward that is offered on you!"

Star stood quiet, and looked straight into Garrett's eyes. After a minute of silence, Garrett's lips twisted into a smile, and he said mockingly, "Well, pirate? What are you thinking of?"

Star said, in a low, cold voice, "I'm thinking of putting an electron fire-blade into your face, Devil Garrett!"

Garrett laughed . . . huge, rather evil, bluff laughter. The mirth of a person who is both powerful and dangerous. And

then the girl leaped forward, shaking with rage.

"You beast! Murderer! To accuse this man . . . you fool, you might have been able to complete any scheme of escape you had, if you hadn't called yourself Starrett Blade! Mr. Blade. . . ." She gestured toward Garrett, who made a mocking, sardonic bow. ". . . has given me ample proof that he is who he says! And this long before you came. He's shown me papers giving a description and showing a tri-dimension picture of you . . ."

Fire leaped in Star's eyes. "Listen . . ." he snapped furiously, as he started to step forward. Then Garrett made a signal with his hand, and someone drove a fist against the base of Star's skull.

WHEN Star came to, he was in a cell of sorts. A man standing by the door told him that he was to be executed, ". . . after Mr. Blade and the lady have eaten." Starrett swore at him, and the man went out, with a mocking "Goodbye, Mr. Garrett!"

Star got up. His head spun, and he almost fell at first, but the daze left in his head from the two blows quickly cleared away. He felt for various weapons which he had hidden about him . . . and found them gone. Garrett's men had searched carefully.

Star sat down, his head spinning more now from mystery than from physical pain. He had to keep himself in a whole skin, of course. That was most important right now. But other things were bothering him, tugging at his mind like waves slapping around a swamped ship, each trying to shove it in a different direction.

There was the girl. Star wondered why she always leaped into his mind first. And there was the way Garrett was trying to leave the impression that he was Blade, so that he could kill Blade as Garrett.

Obviously, the reason for that was the girl, Miss Hinton, Garrett had called her. She had been shown faked papers by Garrett, papers proving that the two were . . . were whatever Garrett had twisted the story into!

Star clutched at his head. He was in a mess. He was going to be killed, and he was going to die without knowing the score. And he didn't like that. Nor did

he like dying as Star Blade shouldn't die; executed as a "wolf's-head" pirate. The girl would be watching, and he felt as if that would make it far worse.

His head came up, and he smiled flintily. He still had an ace card! One hand felt for it, and he shook his head slowly. It was a gamble . . . but all the others had been found.

Blade looked up quickly, as the door opened. Two men came into the cell, carrying jet-guns. They motioned Blade to his feet. "Come on, Blade." One began, when the other hit him across the mouth.

"You fool!" he hissed. "You better not call him that; suppose that girl was to hear it? Until the boss gets what he wants on Earth, that girl has got to think that he's Blade! We're killing this guy as Devil Garrett! And a loud-mouthed fool like you . . . look out!"

Blade had landed on the bickering men, and was grappling with the one who had called him by name. As the other leaped forward, swinging a clubbing blow with a jet-gun, Star tripped one man into the corner, and ducked under the gun. He hit the man in the stomach, drove a shoulder up under his arms, and smashed the man's face in with a series of sharp blows. The man went reeling backward across the room, and Star's hand leaped toward that "ace card" which he still held.

Devil Garrett stepped in the door, and made a mock out of a courteous bow. As he did so, Star snarled in rage, but stood very still, for the electron knife in Garrett's hand did not waver.

Garrett gestured silently toward the door, and Star, equally silent, walked over and out, at the point of the weapon.

STAR BLADE stood before a transmitter, and thought about death.

He was very close to it. Garrett stood five yards away, a gun in his hand, and the muzzle trained on Blade's chest. The gun was the universally used weapon of execution, an old projectile-firing weapon.

Star did not doubt that Devil Garrett was an excellent shot with it.

The girl, very round-eyed and nervous, sat by Garrett. He had explained to her that Garrett was the type of pirate that it is law to kill, or have executed, by anyone. Which was very true.

A man stepped away from the transmitter, and nodded to Garrett. Star felt a surge of hope, as he saw that it was a two-way transmitter. If the image of an Interstellar Command headquarters was tuned in—Garrett would undoubtedly do it, if only to show the police that he had killed Starrett Blade—then Garrett could not kill him and cut the beam in time to prevent one of the police from giving a cry that would echo over the sub-space beam arriving almost instantly in this room, and let the girl know that she had been tricked. And Garrett would not want that. Not that it would matter to Starrett Blade.

Then Star saw what kind of a transmitter it was, and he groaned. It was not a Hineson Sub-space beamer . . . it was an old-style transmitter which had different wave speeds, because of the different space-bridger units in it.

The visual image would arrive many seconds before the sound did. Thus the girl would not hear Garrett revealed, but would see only Blade's death. And then . . . whatever Garrett had planned, Blade wished heartily that he could have the chance to interfere.

The beam was coming in. Star saw the mists swimming on the screen change, solidify into a figure . . . the figure of District Commander Weddel seated at a desk. He saw Weddel's eyebrows rise, saw his lips move—then Garrett stepped over a pace, and Weddel saw him, saw the gun in his hand. . . .

The police officer yelled, silently, and came to his feet, an expression of shocked surprise on his face—surprise, Blade thought desperately, that the girl might interpret as shock at seeing Devil Garrett.

Which was right, in a way.

Then, as Commander Weddel leapt to his feet, as Devil Garrett's finger tightened on the trigger, as the girl sucked in her breath involuntarily, Star Blade, scooped up a bit of metal—a fork—and flung it at the vision transmitter.

Not at the screen. But at the equipment behind the dial-board. At a certain small unit, which was almost covered by wires and braces for the large tubes. And the fork struck it, bit deep, and caused result.

Result in the form of a burned-out set. If television equipment can curse, that set



cursed them. Its spitting of sparks and blue electric flame mingled with a strange, high-pitched whine.

It was the diversion that caused Garrett to miss Star, which gave him time to pull three or four of Garrett's men onto the floor with him. One of the men drove the butt of a jet-gun into the side of Star's head, and for the third time, he went very limp. The last thing he saw was the girl.

Somehow, the expression on her face was different from what it had been. He was searching for the difference, when the blow struck him. Somewhere in the space that lies between consciousness and unconsciousness, he reflected bitterly that if he kept staring at the girl when he should be fighting, he might not recover some day. This was the third time that he had been knocked out that way. It was not getting monotonous. He still felt it a novelty.

Star awoke in the same prison cell, facing the wall away from the door. He wondered if he were still alive, tried to move his head, and decided that he wasn't. He didn't even get up or look around when he dimly heard the door being opened.

But when he heard the girl's voice, he came up and around very swiftly, despite his head.

It was the girl all right. Even through the tumbled mists of his brain, he could see that she was not a dream. And as he reeled and fell against the wall, she was beside him in a flash, her arm supporting him.

**A**T FIRST he tried to push himself erect, his head whirling with sick dizziness, and bewilderment. Through a twisting haze, he peered up at the girl's face. It reflected a look that, amazingly, was one of—with no other phrase to do—compassion. Star half-sighed, and laid his head on the girl's breast, and closed his eyes.

In a minute or two, she said tensely, "Are you all right?" Star looked up at her.

"I guess so. Here—give a hand while I get my balance." She held him as he tried a step or two, and then he straightened. "I guess I'll be all right, now," he smiled. "My head feels like—say! How come you're doing this? What made you

change your mind? And who are you?"

She said quickly, breathlessly, "I know you're Star Blade, now. That transmission set. . . . I can read lips! I *knew* what that officer was saying! It was just as if I had *heard* him say that . . . that you were Starrett Blade and that man out there is Devil Garrett!" she made a choking sound. "And I've been here, alone, for a month! For a month!"

"A month? Huh—please—you . . . ?"

Star took a breath, and started over. "You. . . . Who *are* you? What are you doing here?"

She said, "I'm Anne Hinton. My father is Old John Hinton. Have you heard of him?"

"Of course!" said Star. "He manufactures most of the equipment '*Blade Cosmian*' uses. Weapons, Hineson Sub-Spacers, Star-Traveler craft . . . the ship I was in when Garrett brought me down was a Hinton craft. I should have recognized the name. But go on. What—"

"Garrett communicated with dad, secretly. He posed as Starrett Blade, as you, and told dad that he was developing certain new power processes. And he is! He has a new—or maybe it isn't so new—way of electrolyzing water to liberate hydrogen and oxygen."

"I think I understand," said Star quickly. "When the oxygen and hydrogen are allowed to combine, and produce an explosion which drive a turbine-generator. Then that could be hitched up to a cyclotron, and even the most barren of Alpha's lake-rock planets could be. . . ."

"No," she shook her head puzzledly. "It's just electric power. He said that atomics would release stray rays that would attract pirates."

"I know," Star nodded, abstractedly. "I was thinking of another application of it . . . hmm. But say! What was Garrett after? I know that he wouldn't do this just to get a secret process sold. He must have had another plan behind it. Got any idea?"

Anne shook her head slowly. "I don't know. I can't see. . . ."

"Perhaps I could help you?" Devil Garrett asked smoothly from the door.

Star whirled, thrust Anne behind him, but there was no way out. Garrett stood in the door, and there were men behind

him. The jet in his hand could kill both of the two at one shot. And they had no weapons to resist with.

Devil Garrett stepped them out of the room, and down the corridor, through a large door Star had noticed at the end of the passage, and into a huge room.

It must have been a thousand feet long, and half that wide. It was at least a hundred yards deep. And it was almost filled with gigantic machines.

Between the machinery, the spaces were almost filled with steel ladders and catwalks. Crews of men swarmed over them. It was the largest mass of equipment Starrett had ever seen.

His eyes began to pick out details. Those huge vat-like things down at the far end, with the large cables running into them, and the mighty pumps connected to them . . . they were probably the electrolysis chambers.

And those great pipes, they must carry the hydrogen and oxygen from the electro chambers to the large replicas of engines, which could be nothing else but the explosion chambers, where the gases were allowed to re-unite, and explode. And there by the giant engines, those must be turbines, which in turn connected with the vast-sized generators just under the platforms on which they stood.

STAR BLADE whistled softly through his teeth. A huge enterprise! It could be . . . but for a moment he had forgotten Devil Garrett.

The girl standing by his side, Star turned toward Garrett. "Well?"

Garrett smiled his mocking grin. "You grasp the principle, of course. But let me show you . . . you see those pipes that run from the turbines after the wheels?"

"Yes. They carry the gases off. Where do they lead?"

"Into giant subterranean caverns beneath the surface!" Garrett said. "Now look over there, on the platforms across from us. Can you recognize a Barden energy-beamer, Blade? Run by power from my little plant here, which is run by water from a thousand lakes!"

"Just imagine, if you can, hundreds of those plants all over Alpha III. And each one with dozens of high-powered Barden beams to protect it! And Hinton ray

screens to protect us from radio-controlled rocket shells from space, or Barden Rays, or any other weapon of offence, or to warn if anyone lands on this planet!" Garrett leaned forward, his eyes aglow.

"Blade, I'll take over the few governing posts on this little planet, and I'll rule an entire world, a whole planet to myself! It'll be the first time in history! And it won't be the last. With the Hinton secret patents, the plans of all John Hinton's inventions and processes. . . ."

Star twisted, and got his "ace card" out of its hiding place.

It was a jet weapon, little more than a jet-blast capsule for a jet-gun. The sides were thicker and stronger, and there was a device fixed on it so it could be fired. Altogether, it was somewhat smaller than an old-style fountain pen.

He twisted up from the floor, and moved faster than he had moved ever before. Star was famous for his speed and the quickness and alertness of his reflexes. He earned his fame a score of times over in that one instant.

And Devil Garrett died.

There was perhaps an eighth of a second between the staff of blue white fire from the tiny jet in Star's hand and the huge broadsword of fire from Garrett's gun. But in the split-second Star's fire knifed into Garrett's vitals, and Garrett gave a convulsive jerk, and fired even as his muscles started the jerking movement.

And the flame went over Star's head, singeing his scalp.

Of the four men with Garrett, one let go of the struggling Anne, and swore as he snatched at an electron knife in his belt. Anne's hand had already whipped the knife out, and without bothering to press the electron stud, she buried the knife in his back.

Two of the remaining men whirled, and went for the door as though a devil was after them. The other tried to get a jet-gun out. It was his final mistake. A blue lance from Anne's knife whipped close enough to him to make him dodge, and then Star got his hand on Garrett's jet.

The other two men had, in their flight, taken a door which led, not into the large corridor, but into a small room at one side, a room filled with instruments and recording devices for the machinery in

the room below. Star leaped to the side of the door, and called, "Are you going to come out, or am I coming in to get you?"

There was a short silence, in which Anne heard one say hoarsely, "He can't get us . . . we could get him if he came in the door."

"Oh, yes?" was the answer. "Do you know who that guy is? He's the one they call 'Death Star.' I'm not facing Starrett Blade in a gun fight. You can do what you like, but I'm leaving." Then he lifted his voice. "Hey, Blade! I'm coming out. Don't shoot."

"OKAY," threw back Star and the man appeared in the doorway, empty hands held high. After a second, the other joined him.

Anne turned to Star. "Now I know why they call you 'Death Star' Blade," she said, and gestured toward the men who had surrendered, and the two whom Starrett had shot down.

He mused there for a minute. Then Anne broke the silence with, "Star, what are we going to do now? Garrett's men will be up here in a little while. We can't get to a sub-space beam. What are we going to do when they come up to investigate?"

Starrett blade laughed. "Do? Well, we could turn them over to Commander Weddell!"

"What?"

Grinning broadly, Star pointed, with a flourish, at the door. Anne spun about, and found Commander Weddell grinning in the door from the corridor.

"Very simple," said Star across the lounge to Anne. "When I smashed the vision set with that dinner fork, I broke a small unit which is included in all sets. You know, a direction finder doesn't work, except in the liner-beam principle, in space, because of the diffusing effect of unrestricted cosmic rays."

"Yes, I knew that," said Anne. "But how—"

Starrett grinned again. "A type of beam has been found which it is impossible for cosmos to disturb. But you can't send messages on it, so it is made in a little unit on every set. If that unit is broken,

the set automatically releases a signal beam. This is a distress signal, and the location of the set that sent out the signal is recorded at the Section Headquarters. When Commander Weddell saw me throw something at the set, and it went dead, he looked at the automatic record, and found out that a signal had been sent in from a location on Alpha Cen's third planet. Then he had a high-velocity cruiser brought out and dropped in, in time to pick up some pieces." He stopped, and idly toyed with a sheaf of papers, then held them up. "See these papers?"

"Uh-huh. What are they, Star?"

"They are the main plans of Devil Garrett's power plant, and they're the one good thing he's ever done. These plans are going to bring the barren, rocky Centauri planets to life!"

He got up, and paced to the window, and stood there, looking out, and up through the plastic port. "The planets of Centauri!" he murmured softly. "Seven circling Alpha alone. And all seven are barren, rocky, level except for the thousands of lakes . . . lakes that are going to be the life of Centauri!"

HE TURNED back to the window. "And all because a pirate named Devil Garrett built a vast power plant to use to garner more power!"

"You know, Anne, as a mockery, and a warning, I think I'll propose that this planet be officially named . . . 'Garrett'!"

She looked up at him, and there was laughter bright in her eyes, and tugging at her mouth. "Yes, there ought to be a reason," she murmured. Star wavered. She was so darn close.

After a minute, she turned her head, and looked up at him. "Star, how soon will there be those gardens and woods you described? I mean, how long before Garrett can be turned into that kind of world you described?"

"Why . . . under pressure, we can do it in six months. Why?"

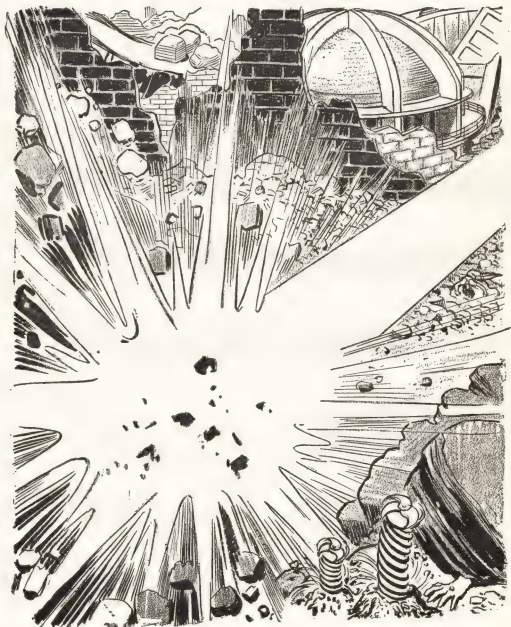
"Not half quick enough," she murmured happily, "but it'll have to do, Star." Laughing, she turned her face up to his. "Have you ever thought that planet Garrett will be wonderful for a honeymoon?"

# Vandals of the Void

By ROBERT WILSON

The Void had spawned these hell-creatures of destruction, had sown them deep within Earth's soil. And now Earth was reaping a whirlwind of death—weapons futile against the immortal conquerors from another space.

*Illustration by DOOLIN*





*The disintegrator blasted, and hell exploded on the ground.*

ART DOUGLAS saw one of the very first of them, found and brought in by two drivers from the huge steel burrowing worm which was at that time conducting the sub-crust explorations many miles below the rolling Kansas prairies. Why the men should have brought the discovery to an organization such as the Interplanetary Research Institute, was something not quite clear to Art. They must have known, he reflected bitterly, how utterly bogged down the Institute was, how

close to absolute disintegration, from inability to work or progress, and the resultant effect on the morale of the highly trained scientists who made up its staff.

But the weird organism which lay before him on the laboratory bench dispelled all such thoughts immediately. His imaginative, yet scientific brain leaped to meet the challenge and the Interplanetary Research Institute became only a workshop full of tools, ready for his use.

It was only natural that he should first

assume that the creature-plants were probably native to the level at which they had been found, and that this was their natural environment. How terribly wrong this was to prove! Of the terrible menace in the thing before him, Douglas could not dream; although he could plainly see its potentialities. For it had been found boring through solid rock.

It seemed to have been designed for just that. Its form was that of spiral screw, about a foot long, tapering from a diameter of about an inch at one end, to four inches at the other. In color it was a dull blue-black, the surface fine textured and smooth, and steely hard. Its strength was of steel also, for it was constantly whipping about, trying to fasten its three needle sharp jaws, which were located at the smaller end, in anything it might find. One of the men who brought it had suffered a frightful gash in the forearm before they had learned that this could be avoided by picking it up at the larger end. The creature could not quite achieve the feat of bending itself double.

Art found that once it had hooked those fierce jaws into anything, it started boring and could not be torn loose. However, it would bore *only upward!* When laid on a flat table, it merely writhed about, looking for some object above it. He held a thick piece of board over it. The head had bored through in a few seconds, but when he turned the board over, it backed out hastily, and flopped to the table again, where it resumed its endless searching, searching for something, anything overhead, in which it could fasten its tenuous grip.

Art called and had a huge two ton block of granite brought in by the overhead crane. In its lower side he ordered some workmen to chip a cavity, a little larger than the creature on the table. The thing was dropped on the floor, and the block carefully lowered over it, so that it was imprisoned in the cavity. Art had a hunch that it would have made little difference to the creature whether it was allowed the cavity, or merely had the block dropped on it. A little shudder ran through him at the thought of such unearthly strength. He decided to go to lunch, before he got too deeply involved.

PASSING through the outer office, he met Elene Moor, lovely secretary to Doctor Theller, Chief Director of the Institute and his immediate superior. He had known Elene in college before securing this position, and he remembered the sudden elation he had felt when he discovered that he would be working near the girl for whom he had felt such a hopeless yearning in school. She had been so popular, so surrounded by young men whose zest for life, talent for fun, and supply of ready cash had utterly overwhelmed him. Now, after five years of Interplanetary, such a dull apathy had settled over him that even Elene's golden loveliness failed to stir him.

"Might as well lunch with me, Elene," he said, seeing that she was about to leave. "I have an interesting topic of conversation for the first time in ages, it seems. In fact, I'm very anxious to tell you about it."

She looked at him closely. Something certainly had aroused his interest. His keen blue eyes were alight, and his rugged frame seemed to be invested with a nervous energy which had long been dormant. Elene was glad; he almost looked like the Art she had loved, and had such hopes for, when he had first come to the Institute. But his fine intellect had seemingly withered, stultified by the impossible situation which existed at Interplanetary in the year 2186. Several centuries of scientific struggling had finally produced a mode of interplanetary travel. In 2135, successful landings and safe returns had been made to and from Mars. A year later, Venus was also reached. But fifty-one years had produced little knowledge of any value; progress was at a standstill. Certainly the Martians had been found to be a highly developed and scientific race. They were peaceful and friendly. But they were also very wise. They were acquainted with the history of man on Earth as far back as the time of Christ. Their astronomical instruments made it possible to see plainly events there, under the proper conditions. With the coming of wireless, they had been able to intercept any and all signals they chose. They knew about all they needed or wanted to know about Earth. That was what made them so wary. For they had seen the torture of the early Christians, and the cruel subjugation of the known world by the Romans. They



had seen in turn, the overrunning of Rome by the barbarian hordes. They had known Attila the Hun. They had witnessed the Spanish Inquisition. They had seen the slaughter of the aborigines in the new world, their gradual extinction by the white colonists. They had known Napoleon, and most monstrous and horrible of all, Hitler. They had finally seen the Great Gas War, which had so decimated the ranks of mankind, that it had been necessary to set up the International Peace Council, which established peace by the only method which mankind seemed to be able to understand—force.

IT WAS rather simple. The laws were very strict: briefly, the manufacture, transporting, or even possession of any kind of murder weapon, other than what might be carried by a man for his personal defense, was considered sufficient evidence of intent to kill, and carried a death penalty. The agents and inspectors of the Council were everywhere, entering any machine shop or factory at will, constantly checking all sources of raw material, making almost impossible any secret manufacture of any type of armament.

But even this could not convince the canny Martians—for they knew that thousands of years of barbarism were covered only by a thin veneer. At any time, man's innate desire to conquer, pillage, and exterminate another race might break through. The Martians well knew the age-old tactics of infiltration used by colonists of Earth. Consequently, only a few scheduled rocket trips per year were permitted. The personnel of each expedition was restricted to a few scientists, who were carefully investigated. They were allowed to study the language, customs, and art of Mars. But scientific achievements and secrets were taboo. No Earthman was permitted to roam at will on Mars—the knowledge they acquired there was given them by an interviewing committee of high ranking Martians, whose ability to sidestep a direct question was uncanny.

Of course, there were a few political hotheads on Earth who advocated building a huge fleet of rocket ships, powered with disintegrators, and sending an expedition to subdue the red planet. Naturally, this merely served to corroborate the bad

opinion of Earth held by the superscientists of Mars. A few men, such as Doctor Theller and Art, knew what awful disasters such a move would bring. Not only did the Martians have weapons which made the terribly effective, but uncontrollable, atomic disintegrator look like a clumsy toy, but they could also throw up a force field around their entire planet, at an unknown height, against which any invading ship would smash into blazing fragments.

True, there was Venus. Venus, the Jungle Planet. There were two environments of Venus—water and jungle. Both were filled with a teeming growth of nightmarish monsters, among which had been found no intelligent beings. The creatures of Venus were born, fought and ate one another, bred and died. That was all. The whole thing was one vast aquarium. Most of the species had been classified during the ten years following the first landing. There had been many expeditions at first. But gradually they tapered off. Attempts at colonization were given up as hopeless. The climate was sultry and oppressive, but worst of all was the fact that practically all of the vegetation of Venus was poisonous to humans. Any food crops introduced from Earth were strangled by the lush native vegetation, which grew at an incredible rate. Venus had no economic value. Minerals there were, but the expense of freighting them back to Earth by rocket ship made mining impractical.

As Elene mulled over these gloomy thoughts, she and Art had covered the short distance from the office to the tube that led to Food Center. As they entered, she saw that he also was preoccupied. In good time, he would tell her what had aroused his sudden enthusiasm. An empty car came by. A photoelectric cell registered their presence in the tube. It stopped, Art dropped a token in a slot in its side, and the door slid silently open. As they entered, Art grinned and said:

"They're junking these cars next year. Seems they have developed a new model. They were losing money on these—they waste a lot of time. They always stop for you whether you want a car or not; perhaps you're just waiting to meet someone, or just got off a car."

"I hardly see what they can do about

that," laughed Elene. "Telepathic communication between man and a machine is something considered pretty far in the future."

"They still use the photo cell," answered Art, "but now it registers a complete picture of you. By a system of hand signals the prospective passenger will be able to indicate whether he wants a car, where he is going, et cetera. Even the control panel, which we now set for our destination, will be eliminated."

SOON they were seated in the one huge cafeteria which served the entire city of Washington. Various levels were frequented by different classes of citizens, and Art and Elene chose a quiet one, usually patronized by scientific and medical students. Their meal was ordered by dialing from a numbered menu and arrived automatically in a few seconds, piping hot.

Once they were settled, Art began to tell the girl of the weird thing that had been brought him.

"I've had no time at all to work on it, of course," he began, "but this much I can almost say for sure—this thing is not an organism like anything else on Earth's crust. Its life processes do not depend on oxidation. It's not composed, as we are, principally of hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon. Carbon, perhaps, yes; that might give it some of its hardness—but it's inert, not involved in any chemical action. The thing neither breathes nor eats!"

"Please, Art, start at the beginning—you haven't told me what it looks like, or anything!"

"O.K., O.K.," he grinned, and obligingly did so, concluding with, "It's not much, maybe—hasn't anything to do with planetary research, but it's a job—something to keep me busy. That's hard enough to find, these days."

"Art," she said quickly, "it seems to me that there's plenty to do now, as never before; so much untapped knowledge right at our fingertips—"

"I don't see how you can say that," he interrupted bitterly. "I wouldn't exactly call Mars at our fingertips."

"Why Mars? It's always Mars, Mars. You don't have to go there. Find out the secrets they know for yourself. Just be-

cause you're stymied that doesn't mean you can't go ahead yourself. A young man with initiative could—"

"So I haven't any initiative!" he flared. "Well, how about yourself? After all, a woman now is as good as a man, you know—with modern advantages, physical strength and endurance aren't so important. A woman with enough courage and will power can do as much as any man."

"Yes, Art, but a woman is still a woman. All the scientific progress in the world can't change that—she still plays the passive role. Woman would cease to be feminine otherwise. That was proved way back in the twentieth century."

"I suppose you're right," he muttered. It had set him thinking. Was he losing his manhood? The human race didn't have so much need for expansion any more. Only greed and craving for adventure would set a man exploring now. And he had neither. Or had he? He thought of the daydreams he sometimes had—of roaming through the primitive jungles of Venus, searching perhaps for a trace of a near human, intelligent civilization, blasting his way through hordes of threatening monsters. But all that was silly; he was a trained man, and it would be very foolish to risk such a brain as his in that hotbed of violence.

Still, what good was that precious brain doing anyone at Interplanetary? The shortage of radium prevented their going ahead with the program of experiments which Dr. Theller had mapped out. The idea of wasting their dwindling supply in a roundabout process of learning what the Martians could so easily tell them, had turned the staff of the Institute into a pack of frustrated malcontents.

THE EARTH easily supported its population of ten billion. Masterpieces of engineering had irrigated and made fertile practically all of the Earth's surface, except around the poles. There was no need to grow crops, anyway, other than that fresh natural foods were more palatable. Enough food for a hundred billion people could be manufactured synthetically from the sun's rays. There was no need, say, for colonizing Venus, but such a project would certainly provide an outlet for the energies of a bored young scientist.

Art still sulked as they returned to the laboratory, but the idea had been planted in his mind, and the more he thought, the nearer he came to admitting that Elene was right. Little did he dream that he would soon be so busy that looking for thrills would be the least of his worries.

A white faced attendant met them at the front door of the laboratory.

"Dr. Douglas! That thing—we can't control it—it's—" Art ran to the room where he had left the creature. The granite block was where he had left it, but had a neat round hole in its top. Then he looked at the opposite wall of the room. It was a crumbling ruin. The wormlike animal had evidently wriggled its way to the plastocrete wall where it had started boring. As the wall was only five or six inches thick, it had kept emerging from one side or another, dropping to the floor, and starting all over again. The attendants, not knowing how to pick it up, had left it alone after suffering several gashes. They were afraid to handle it too roughly, for fear of damaging it. Art smiled grimly at this. He picked the thing up, threw it on the table. He decided that he would dissect the specimen here and now, find the secret of its mighty strength. But at that moment Dr. Theller came in.

"Well, Art, I hope you've thoroughly familiarized yourself with that creature because—"

"To tell you the truth, Dr. Theller, I don't know a darn thing about it!" retorted Art cheerfully.

"You're going to learn, Art—and mighty soon! I'm going to send you out to Los Angeles. Something catastrophic is happening out there. I can't get anything very clear over the televisior—I see confused pictures of buildings crashing, utter panic everywhere. All the accounts I've heard are garbled—but creatures like this seem to have something to do with it!"

"Find out what you can, do what you can, then report back. Of course, the city has no defenses, other than the police force, and they are armed only with shock guns." It was true—war was non-existent; defensive armament was unnecessary. Everything was fireproof, making a fire department likewise unnecessary.

Art took off in his strato flier from the

roof of the laboratory, climbing rapidly until he reached the thin isothermal layer, ten miles up. Then he leveled off, and accelerated slowly to a speed of over one thousand mph. At this rate, he would be able to reach Los Angeles in not over two and a half hours. The time dragged as Art tried to picture the disaster that had overtaken the West Coast city, and just how it could have been caused by animals like the one he had seen.

Art always disliked riding the strato layer. Too far below him were the rich, rolling prairies, the mountains covered with mighty timber trees and lush greenery. There was no desert, no wasteland. Any land not level enough to grow crops, or occupied by cities, was covered by thick forest. The only exceptions were the higher peaks of the Rockies, brilliant white patches against the green carpet. It was a beautiful old planet, this Mother Earth.

Far ahead and to his right, Art finally glimpsed the sparkle of sunlight of the Inland Sea. Once there had been a ghastly blazing hot desert there, called Death Valley, Art remembered from his school geography. Two centuries ago, engineers had dug a tunnel and let the water of the Pacific in, thereby giving the surrounding desert land a much moister climate. Such a primitive measure would not have been necessary in modern times. Distilled sea water could be piped anywhere, in any desired amount, for irrigation.

## II

THE SIGHTING of the Inland Sea was a signal to start decelerating. The Los Angeles zone signal appeared, a red light on his control panel. The L.A. beam picked him up, swung him gently to the left, and brought him in automatically.

Below him he saw swarms of family fliers, all coming from the city. As he dropped down he found the traffic system entirely disorganized. Outgoing fliers were filling the incoming lanes. After narrowly missing sudden death several times, Art savagely dialled traffic center. The televisior screen lit up—but instead of a picture of the control officer seated at his switchboard, Art saw only an empty chair. It was only then that he realized the extent of the panic that gripped Los Angeles

—for the control officer was sworn to remain at his post through the direst emergencies.

Now he was over the city—the vast terraced, pyramidal structures of the metropolitan area, each a mile square at the base, with a narrow rim of landing strip around each level. But as he descended lower he saw that they were no longer structures, but ruins. Even as he watched, they were crumbling and caving in on themselves. Some of them were already mere vast heaps of rubble. Projecting his helicopter propellers, he dropped down and hovered over one of them. Everywhere the broken plastoglass was covered with writhing, squirming duplicates of the creature back in his laboratory.

Art fished out his code book, found the wave length of Los Angeles Police Commissioner Horne, and rapidly dialled it. The strained and perspiring face of the Commissioner appeared, sitting at the controls of his ship as he vainly tried to straighten out the evacuating traffic.

"Douglas of the Institute reporting, Commissioner."

"Hope you brought some disintegrators!" barked the chief. "They're the only thing that will touch these beasts. The shock ray has no effect whatsoever on them. An electron torch will burn them, but that's no good—you can't go about killing them one by one. There are billions of them—they're everywhere!"

"Possibly you'd better describe the situation from the beginning for my benefit, Commissioner," Art interposed.

"What!" roared Horne. "Theller gave me to understand that you had had experience with these things, and understood them. Now you tell me—"

"Easy, Commissioner. I've seen one of these things before for a few minutes, and that's all. You asked for help and Dr. Theller sent me out here in good faith to do what I can." This served to quiet the policeman somewhat, for he merely grunted, "O.K., meet me at the top level of the Administration group; that's the silver one, the only one that still has a top level. You'll have to find it. We had to move out the traffic control—that section of the building's ready to go any minute now."

A dull grinding roar rose from every-

where below Art as he crossed the city. Clouds of dust billowed up as the huge pyramids fell in upon themselves piece by piece. He saw now the grimly effective way in which the creatures did their job. As long as there was one piece left standing on another, they would bore and chew until it was reduced to fragments. Blind instinct, rather than malice, seemed to impel them. But the effect was equally devastating. Art saw scores of people wiped out by falling wreckage when the rapidly shuttling overloaded fliers failed to remove them in time. He saw one man, trapped amidst a mass of the writhing horrors, make a sudden dash for freedom, and go down screaming in agony as dozens of savage jaws instantly fastened themselves in his flesh. Art shuddered. Something had to be done to stop this carnage.

**B**Y THE TIME he sighted the commissioner's flier atop the silver pyramid of the Civic Center, he had evolved the rudiments of a plan.

He wasted no time on amenities as he met the police chief, but came to the point immediately. "Here's my idea of it, Horne. Los Angeles as a city is doomed. But I think we can save most of the people who are still here."

"How about those disintegrators?" cut in Horne. The disintegrator, being still in the experimental stage, was dynamite in the hands of the untrained. The terrific atomic explosions it set up were uncontrollable and unpredictable. Only the most highly respected and trusted scientists were even allowed to handle one. Horne nursed an idea that all his patrolmen should have been issued one to pack on their hips, and that if they had, this would never have happened.

"I have a couple with me. We can use them, but we'll have to be extremely careful. My main proposal is to get to San Francisco, Los Vegas, and all the other principal cities around here organized. Have them send millions of civilian fliers. Did you ever hear of the battle of Dunkirk in World War II? The British saved their army to fight again another day, just in that manner."

"Do you suppose I haven't thought of that?" snapped the chief. "I've already

asked them. They're afraid to come. Only a few ships have trickled in."

"We've got to convince them that it's safe for a flier," insisted Art. "Show them on the televisior—send your patrolmen out to explain—anything!"

"All right," agreed Horne. "We'll try it. But I don't believe we can get them all out in time even so. Do you know that there are ten million people out in the poorer residential section, very few of whom own a flier, who depend on the public surface cars for their transportation? Central Power is dead—not a car moves in the city. My patrolmen have been out in La Brea six hours, trying to find an avenue of escape, through which they can lead those people out on foot. Every time they run into a new growth of these—these damnable monsters, and have to start all over again."

"That's where we'll use our disintegrators," explained Art. "We'll blast a path through which we can lead these people to safety." Art got on the televisior and contacted the government broadcasting center in San Francisco. "Do you have a news broadcast on now?" he asked. The girl clerk answered in the affirmative.

"Please put me on," Art begged. "I'm from Interplanetary Research. Here's my badge. This is a serious emergency. The lives of millions of people are hanging in the balance. You must put me on the air!" A moment later, the news broadcast which was even then picturing the catastrophe in billions of homes all over the world, was abruptly cut off, and Art's face appeared in its stead.

"Fellow citizens, you all know the desperate situation here in Los Angeles—but do you know that you can save a life, perhaps a dozen? There are ten million people here who face a terrible death unless they are picked up immediately. Hop in your fliers and get right down here! There is no danger for a ship which hovers a little above the ground. *Do not try to land!* The Los Angeles Traffic Patrol will guide you to proper zones. Please hurry. Thank you." Art snapped off the switch and turned to the chief. "Now, let's try to make some kind of map of the already devastated areas. We'll have to check in some manner to be sure there are no living people left in them, then blast our path

through with the disintegrators."

HORNE readily assented to this plan, and dispatched a number of patrolmen to examine closely the ruined sections. All vicinities which had been taken over entirely by the destroyers, were to be marked by dropping tiny smoke bombs which would send up a dense column of smoke. As the commissioner and Art entered the latter's flier and took off, Art explained the difficulties of using a disintegrator.

"The atomic disintegration of a lump of matter the size of your fist sets off an explosion strong enough to blow one of these big buildings to small fragments. You can imagine what would happen to yourself and the surrounding country if you merely turned a disintegrator beam on the ground, or against a building near you. We tone down the effect somewhat by causing these pistols which I have here, to project a ray about the diameter of a hair from your head. Not only that, but the ray is immediately cut off, lasting only for the duration of one wave length. Even so, the firing of one is a plenty tricky business."

In an hour's time the air patrolmen had laid out a winding, serpentine trail over ten miles long through the bristling mounds of debris. A warning broadcast was sent directing all citizens within sight of the smoke to get underground, lie low, and plug their ears.

"Here we go," said Art, stationing himself at a tiny port in the rear of his flier. "Zoom down over that first signal—as soon as you've passed over it, kick her up again at a slight angle." Horne obeyed. They passed the target; nothing happened. He was beginning to wonder what Art was waiting for, when a half mile past the smoke column, Art fired. The resulting concussion surprised even Art. He felt the ship lurch as it was thrown like a huge projectile high above the city. He grinned as he watched Horne, cursing and fighting until he had the bucking ship under control.

"Let's take a look," he said, sobering at once. He had an uneasy feeling concerning the way in which the grounded population was taking the shock. But his fears were not realized—the stranded folk near-

est the explosion cheered and gave the ancient thumbs-up sign, as they skimmed low above the rooftops. Evidently most of the force of the explosion had expended itself upward.

"Get below—here we come again!" shouted Art through an open port.

The sun was descending beyond the blue Pacific, but they went on with their work of continually blasting, blasting, far into the night. Clouds of private fliers began to appear from neighboring California and other southwest cities. Art's desperate appeal had had its effect. By midnight, people were beginning to stumble through the string of smoking craters that had been made for them, toward the untouched open fields and groves to the north. By four o'clock, they were stringing out on the many roads and streets which left the city in that direction. Busses and private cars had been summoned, and were picking them up, to scatter them through neighboring cities where they might find accommodations.

Art and Horne, bruised and stunned from continual concussion and buffeting, exhausted from lack of sleep, looked at each other.

"**G**UESS that's it," said Art. "You'll have to keep the men along the trail with their electron rays, to keep those devils from closing in at the edges." They had found that a line of men armed with these short-range weapons, could kill enough of the creatures to keep them from spreading. The electron ray generated enough sheer heat to melt metal, which was necessary to destroy the organisms.

"The city should be cleared by noon," Art went on. "I'd advise you to destroy the whole works immediately. I'll leave you one of the disintegrators. But be careful. Make sure all the wounded are out."

"Are you leaving already?" asked Horne, surprised. "How come?"

"Just heard from Dr. Theller," Art answered wearily. "It seems I'm wanted in Detroit. Same thing is happening there."

"No!" gasped Horne. "In Detroit! What do you suppose is the connection?"

"I don't know," Art replied. "I only wish I had time to work this out, to get

some of these things in the lab and analyze them—it would help so much to know what we're fighting."

Art decided he would stop at the laboratory on the way back, and see if Dr. Theller had been able to find out anything of the nature of the specimen he had left behind. As he entered, he saw that the place was strangely deserted. Dr. Theller and Elene he found in the former's office, however.

"I counted on your stopping in," said the Institute head as Art came in. "Things are in pretty serious shape all over. You did a great job in Los Angeles. Now I'm going to ask you to repeat that performance—"

"Detroit?" Art interrupted.

"No—I've already sent several good men there. You don't realize how this thing has spread. In the last hour, Singapore, Cairo and Athens have all called us. London, in fact, the whole of southeastern England, is stricken. The British Foundation has some fine men, however; they think they'll be able to handle it."

"Dr. Theller, must he leave at once?" asked Elene, with an anxious look at Art's weary face.

"I'll be all right, Elene," Art assured her. "A hot shower, hot drink, and a transfusion of supervitalized plasma, and I'll never know I missed a night's sleep. I've been eating a food tablet every now and then, so I'm not at all hungry."

"All right, Art, you get fixed up—then you're off for Cairo. I'll have the commissary issue you some more disintegrators. I wouldn't ask you to do this, but every minute counts. I'm thinking of taking off for Athens and leaving Elene in charge, myself."

"Oh, I almost forgot to ask you, Dr. Theller, have you examined the specimen here yet?"

A chagrined look came over the scientist's face.

"Well, I hate to admit this, Art, but the thing escaped in the confusion. Don't see how it could have gotten very far away. I'll have some of the men look around the grounds for it."

Art shook his head slowly as he went out. Such incompetency seemed unlike the aged savant, but he guessed that inactivity had taken its toll of the old man.



## III

THE WEEK following was a long, hideous nightmare, during which Art flew from city to city, fighting the ghastly scourge which was cropping up more and more rapidly, all over the globe. Vladivostok, Berlin, Cuba—he could hardly remember them all. He was glad he could not sleep, because he knew his dreams would be tortured by visions of men and women being cut to ribbons by millions of rending jaws. It was dreadfully apparent to Art what was happening. The creatures appeared in a particular area almost simultaneously. Every bit of life was wiped out, except for perhaps a few small shrubs and grasses. Huge trees, buildings, even mountains, all came crashing down. All sources of food supply were wiped out. The creatures could be cleared from the ground by disintegration, but more soon came to take their place.

Art flew back to the laboratory in Washington from Manchuria, scene of his latest struggle, shortcutting across the polar cap. He noted with sick dismay that even the ice fields were beginning to bristle with black stubble.

Arriving in Washington, Art landed at the Institute. He searched hurriedly for Dr. Theller, but was unable to find him. Elene, however, appeared.

"Art! I'm so glad to see you safe! Tell me—is it really as terrible as it looks over the television?"

"Ever so much worse," Art answered grimly. "We've got to do something, and quick. I know the Martians could help us. Has Dr. Theller appealed to them?"

"Didn't you know?" she asked, wide eyed. "We haven't had any contact with Mars all week. Two ships were scheduled to arrive from there, and haven't been heard from."

Art whistled softly. "Guess I've been missing quite a bit of news lately!"

"That's not all," Elene continued. "You know Denny was out on Venus with a crew. He sent in some kind of wire to Dr. Theller about discovering some ancient ruins, traces of a lost civilization, and saying that he was heading back. That was over a week ago—he was due in day before yesterday. I've tried repeatedly to contact him on the way, with no success.

Dr. Theller certainly behaves strangely—I don't know—he—"

Art wasn't listening. He was thinking of Denny—the bronzed, hard-bitten space pilot, who had always represented to him all the glamour of the far flung outposts. And been just a darn good friend, too. The perils of Venus were many and varied—but on the other hand, he had the utmost confidence in Denny's ability to take care of his space ship and crew through almost any situation.

"Art, I'm beginning to have a dreadful feeling that somehow this is all tied in together," said Elene hesitantly. "I've been wanting to talk it over with you for ever so long. This plague of subterranean monsters—communications with Mars cut off—Denny out there somewhere, cut off, too—"



"PERHAPS there's not so much cause for concern over Denny," Art put in soothingly. "After all, any sort of trivial accident might have occurred which would delay him this long."

"Yes, Art, but I feel that even though the creatures don't seem to have much intelligence, there is some kind of horrible plan behind the whole thing, and that the stopping of traffic with the other planets is part of that plan."

"That is quite a theory, Elene, my dear," came a patronizing voice from behind, "but it's quite possible that I and my colleagues may be able to work out a solution without the aid of my secretary." Dr. Theller had entered the room unnoticed. Elene flushed, and was on the verge of making an equally caustic retort, but bit back the words.

"As far as Denny is concerned," the doctor went on, "he has been going out there for a good many years now; unless I miss my guess, the space madness is creeping in on his brain. That story of finding remains of a lost civilization—that's really pretty steep, you know. It's well known that the evolution of fauna on Venus has not, and will not, progress to the point of producing reasoning, speaking beings for millions of years."

"I can't believe that of Denny!" flashed Art. "Space madness attacks those who can't stand the solitude, exposure and utter loneliness of that awful void. You know that Denny always laughed at those things. He was iron. And I don't believe he's getting old, either. The last time I saw him, he was in his prime."

A hot argument was averted only by the flashing of signals at one side of the room, which announced a televisior communication. Elene was nearest and flipped the switch. The face of a middle-aged man, tense with suppressed excitement, appeared on the screen. He scanned their faces closely. It was Haight, of the British Foundation.

"Theller—Douglas—all of you!" he blurted. "Listen! I've just found—oh, but what fools we were not to see! Those organisms—they're—but I can't possibly tell you over the air. I'll be there as fast as a strato-ship can take me. I'm bursting to tell someone. There's not a soul here in the lab; it's very late. Expect me in three hours, at the most." The screen went black.

ART AND ELENE were on the roof of the laboratory, enjoying the soft summer evening, and talking over this new turn of events. The city was quiet around them. New hope seemed to blaze within them with the brilliance of the countless stars overhead. Perhaps Haight's discovery meant the turning of the tide in this losing struggle in which they had been participating. Art felt that he could relax for the first time since that heartbreaking week had begun. As his fatigue fell away, he felt a great longing come over him. How near he had come to losing this lovely woman by his side. All those years of dull routine in the lab, near her every day, yet doing nothing about it! But Art

had changed to a man of action, through sheer necessity, and he wore his new personality with heady exuberance. He took the girl in his arms.

"Darling, life is very good," he murmured. "I don't want us to die. I don't want to be pushed off this lovable old earth of ours by an alien form of life. And it's chiefly because of you. But we're not going to let that happen, are we? We're going to fight until every last hideous, ugly one of them is gone."

"Yes, sweet," she sighed contentedly, "And Art, please—when it's all over—let's not just sink back into the old way of life again. I think our love will be able to stand even that test from now on—but let's not put it to that test. Can't we get out of Interplanetary, travel, open up new worlds, just anything like that?"

"I have a hunch that from now on we're going to require plenty of danger in our everyday life," he laughed. "After we're married—"

A shrill whine interrupted them, and they broke apart. Far out in the midnight sky, hours had slipped away like so many minutes, and Haight was arriving. He had been hurling his ship along at a reckless speed and was braking only at the last minute. Now they could see the dark shape arching down toward the laboratory. Suddenly it seemed to stop, to poise in midair. Then it dissolved into a blinding white flash. The deafening roar of the explosion came seconds later. Art and Elene looked at each other in mute horror and despair, amid a great silence broken only by tiny, distant sounds as the fragments of Haight and his ship rained down gently on the city of Washington.

"We'll keep fighting," Art finally said in a dull voice.

#### IV

BENEATH Art's flier swept the tumbled mountains of Ozark Park. Once there had been people who lived there and actually eked a living from cultivating those steep and stony hillsides. Long ago that had been given up as impractical and unnecessary, however, and the whole region had been turned into one vast national forest. It was covered from one end to another with mighty timber, stocked in

profusion with all kinds of wild game. That is, it had been covered the last time Art saw it. Now, the great trees lay tumbled about like so many match sticks, their great roots gnawed away by blind, mindless creatures. There was not a green thing in sight. A pall of smoke hung low overhead—great fires were raging everywhere in the dry stuff. Man had no time to protect the trees, when his own cities were being destroyed.

Art had just left Mexico City, and was headed for Chicago. There he intended to introduce an experiment with which he had had some degree of success elsewhere. He had constructed an ark of thick plastocrete, into which the passengers could be hermetically sealed. Oxygen and food were synthetically manufactured, enabling them to live without danger from the unknown poison in the water. But in his heart, he knew that this was a poor device, that there must be some simpler, more direct solution. After the death of Haight, he had wanted to take one of the Institute's ships, and blast off for Mars. He was sure that the savants of that age-old planet could help. But Dr. Theller had been strongly against this, in fact refused to permit it.

As he sped over the ruined forest, a grim look came over Art's face. He had not seen Elene since the night of Haight's death, four days ago. Since then he had been in the thick of the fight, as before. Elene had been suspicious that the death of the British scientist had been no accident, and had promised to investigate and keep in touch with him. Her lovely face had appeared several times in his television screen, during the first two days, although she had nothing to report except that she loved him. But two more days had passed without a word. Art could raise nobody at the laboratory. He frowned, and thought that he had better have a look there, before he went on to Chicago.

Something caught his eye, below and ahead. There was a patch of untouched forest, a little canyon that had not as yet been invaded by the monsters that were ruining the surrounding country. There the huge trees still waved, calm and unmolested. But there was something else, something sharp and bright that had cap-

tured his attention. Yes, there it was again—a tiny fleck of sky blue. The same sky blue with which his ship, like all the fliers of the Interplanetary Institute, were painted!

HE SWUNG around, and came down in a tight spiral. As he levelled off, he saw a tiny figure, standing at the side of the wrecked ship. It waved frantically, and no doubt shouted. Art settled gently in a thicket of vining maple, and clambered stiffly out of his ship, as the marooned pilot came running toward him. Great Glorious Galaxies! It was Elene!

"Oh, Art, I don't know how you found me, but I'm so glad it's you, darling," she sobbed in his arms.

"Elene, I wasn't looking for you—didn't even know you were lost!" he exclaimed. "It's a miracle that I stumbled on you like this."

"But didn't Dr. Theller—no—of course he wouldn't—"

"How did you ever happen to crash *here*?"

"Dr. Theller sent me with Paul Hedrik, that new boy, you remember, the nice blond one—to check casualty lists in San Francisco. We were crossing the Park, at about thirty thousand, when we ran out of rocket fuel. Well, that wasn't so serious, we could easily make a long glide, and if we could find a place safe from these—worms—we could make a helicopter landing. But Paul saw this little canyon dead ahead. It was the only safe looking place for miles. That meant we had to come in at a steep angle. He licked in the braking jets, hoping there would be a little fuel left in the lines. There was. One of the jets was plugged or something—it exploded back into the cockpit. Paul was killed instantly. I was stunned. The ship was out of control, but I finally came to and managed to make a crash landing somehow."

"Where's Paul's body?" Art asked.

"Still in there." She pointed to the wrecked flier. "My television was smashed. I couldn't stand the thought of sleeping in there. I made a little camp over there by the creek. It was awfully cold, even though I built a fire. But I wasn't frightened—I had my friends—"

"Your friends!" exclaimed Art. Who—

"Don't you see them?" she asked, point-

ing. And he did see what the gloom of the forest had at first hidden from his unaccustomed eyes. The leafy corridors were swarming with creatures. Deer, opossum, raccoon, bear, even a puma or two, all were gathered there in dumb resignation. They knew with unerring instinct that they were trapped, that there was no escape from this tiny island. They made no attempt to molest each other, or the humans who such a short time ago had been their deadly enemies. They drank occasionally from the little creek, but they did not eat.

"You see, I couldn't be lonely," she continued. "It could even have been fun, if I hadn't known that those millions of horrible little jaws were out there in the dark, gnawing, gnawing. You can even hear them. You can hear the big trees crashing down, all day, all night."

"Easy, honey—it's all over now. We're going to get out of here. We'll get Paul's body, and—"

"But Art, don't you see what this means? If Paul hadn't forgotten to fill the fuel tank, if we had had a full tank, we'd have been blown to atoms when that jet exploded—it was only an accident that I escaped. But that plugged jet was no accident—that was deliberate. Don't you think it is strange that Dr. Theller shouldn't let you know when I have been lost for two days? And that he was the only one besides us who knew about Haight's discovery, and his coming to Washington, and that the same accident happened to Haight? And what happened to Denny? I tell you, there are all sorts of things about Dr. Theller that are beginning to add up. From the very first he's occupied only a passive role in this battle, done nothing whatever to help. He let that specimen get away the first day, and has never had another in there for analysis."

"What!" exclaimed Art. "No—Elene—it can't be. You don't know what you're saying!"

#### IV

"ON THE CONTRARY, the young lady is quite right," came a deep bass voice from behind him. Art whirled in sudden panic, reaching for his electron gun. But what he saw froze him to im-

mobility. A tall, gaunt figure, its ebony skin decked with a harness of white plastic, in which were set countless glossy black stones. The head narrow and acquiline to the extreme, with huge, haunting black eyes. A Martian! And one of the Greater Ring of scientists who governed the red planet, judging by the trappings.

"You do not recognize me," chuckled the deep voice. "Why, I remember you well. You came to Mars with Dr. Theller, let me see, June last year, and November the year before, I believe it would be, according to your calendar. They say we all look alike to Earthmen—but surely you know Klamar-lan. I was on the Committee both times."

"Of course I do," beamed Art, holding out his hand. "You had me a bit rattled there for a minute. But you can't imagine how glad we are to see you. Elene, meet Klamar-lan. This is Miss Moor, my fiancée."

"Klamar-lan," said Elene, "as Art has already told you, we are immensely relieved to see you. We hope that you can help us rid our planet of this scourge. Unless you do, the human race and every form of animal life on Earth is doomed."

"I have the means of accomplishing that," he answered gravely. "For how else do you suppose this tiny refuge has remained here, other than through my doing?" They stood in amazement as he went on. "Furthermore, I am rather ashamed of you, Art, for letting so many things which should have been obvious to a man of your calibre, slip by you. But I guess Theller did a pretty good job of covering up."

"How do you happen to be here in such an out of the way spot?" asked Art.

"I had to have a hideout on Earth from which I could steal out and make a few observations," the Martian explained. "And it's a good thing I did, from what I hear. I arrived here from Venus yesterday morning, about five—"

"Only a few hours before we crashed!" exclaimed Elene.

"Yes—the forest in this vicinity was just beginning to be attacked. I landed on the side hill above here, and blanketed this canyon with a choker ray. I didn't want to make it too noticeable—"

"Wait," Art interrupted, "how about

this choker ray—that's the whole thing—that's what we want to know!"

"I'll get to that," rebuked Klalmar-lan. "Anyway, I saw this ship crash—but knowing it was one of Theller's, I had to be careful about offering assistance. I have been watching Miss Moor and wondering if I should have to protect her from all this vicious looking fauna which you have here in such profusion. But I didn't dare trust her until I heard her talk to you. My object was to contact some trustworthy person here on Earth. Now that I've found you, I think we'd better take off for Venus immediately. My ship is right up the hill above us. Incidentally, I have a surprise there—an old friend of yours."

**M**YSTIFIED, the couple followed him through thick underbrush to the space ship. They entered behind him and froze in astonishment. There, lying on a bunk, white and still and swathed in bandages, was Denny!

"Don't be alarmed," Klalmar-lan reassured them. "I've got him under a neural anesthetic. He's suffered a bad radium burn, but I think he'll be all right. Should recover consciousness in a couple of hours." Klalmar-lan was at the controls, and they were rising rapidly. The little spot of green was visible through the rear port, falling away behind them.

"I first met Denny on Venus, where I had been sent to watch for the coming of Ghlak-Ileth, or Hell-worms, as we call them; for they are no new experience to us Martians. Some three thousand Earth years ago, they turned our once beautiful planet into a red desert, almost exterminating our race. Three thousand years before that, our astronomers had watched as uninhabited Mercury gave up its treasure. According to all our calculations, Venus should have been next. When I talked to Denny in his jungle camp, he informed me that he had discovered remains of an ancient civilization on Venus.

"I knew then that something was terribly wrong with our theory—for we had always considered Venus a very young planet, whose evolution of life had not even produced a mammalian form, and would not for millions of years. Now it seemed more plausible that at a remote

age Venus was inhabited by intelligent beings, perhaps more highly developed than we on Earth or Mars, and that some great catastrophe wiped them out, leaving survivors, the ancestors of the present day fauna.

"The answer," he went on, "was plain—the Ghlak-Ileth had already been to Venus! In all probability, Earth would suffer the effect of the next raid! Denny had started for Earth with his crew. I hurried to my ship and followed him. About two hours out, my mass detector indicated the presence of matter about ten thousand miles ahead, but moving *toward* me. In a little while I saw it, approaching headon. A huge blob of a ship, gleaming like quicksilver, shaped like a great flat-bellied slug. The Ghosts of Outer Space had come again!"

"Hold it!" cried Art. "This is getting beyond me. 'Who are these—'"

"We call them Ghosts, or Voornizar, because they bear little resemblance to anything mortal, although they are terribly real. They are the masters, the creators of these Hellworms, whom they planted countless eons ago on the planets of our Solar System. The impelling energy of these Ghlak-Ileth, as with their masters, and in fact all the machinery they use, is the disintegration of radium, of which they are partially composed. They devour it for food.

"We believe that the Voornizar originate in some planetary system far beyond the awful void which surrounds our solar family. Long ago, they found their radium supply disappearing, and were forced to wander in search of new deposits. They developed the Ghlak-Ileth in their laboratories to do the work of removing the radium. They were probably planted as tiny eggs or spores, each with an infinitesimal bit of radium to furnish life energy. When the creatures hatched, their instinct was to dig downward. As they went, they fed on radium and other elements.

"Thus, ever growing and multiplying, they remained, finally absorbing every bit of radium in the planet. After a fixed period, they became imbued with the impulse to return to the surface. There they were collected by the Voornizar, who returned at exactly the proper time, to extract the radium for their own use. The

period of three thousand years is, we believe, the time necessary for a round trip from here to the habitat of the Voornizar. However, it may be only the period between meals—for time means nothing to them—nor do heat, cold or lack of atmosphere affect them."

"How can be possibly combat such a menace?" asked Elene hopelessly.

"THIS TIME we Martians are ready," Klalmar-lan told them. "Before, we were forced to resort to pitiful devices such as lead lined boats, which shut out the deadly emanations of the radon gas which seeped to the surface from the Ghlak-Ilek on the sea bottoms. But now we have developed a weapon—the choker ray, harmless to organisms like ourselves, but able instantly to halt any sort of disintegration, particularly radio-activity. It will stop the Voornizar instantly.

"As soon as I recognized this Voornizar ship, I let her have the choker beam. She immediately lost headway, began to drift. I came alongside and boarded her, being careful to put on a space suit, for the Voornizar require no atmosphere, and would not be likely to have the ship's interior conditioned. I found what I expected. There was not a living creature, or moving piece of machinery aboard. I had heard the fearsome Ghosts described many times, but these were the first I had seen. Their silvery, amorphous bodies are said to glow with a blinding white effulgence, but in death, these had turned to a dull leaden hue. There were hundreds of them in the great ship, which seemed to me mostly occupied by machinery with which to attract and grapple the radium worms, and holds in which to store them.

"On an upper deck, I found a row of small staterooms, which I thought wise to investigate. And well that I did, for my former presumption that nothing lived on the ship was not quite correct. That was one who *barely* lived—"

"Barely is the word, my friend," came a weak voice from the bunk. "I don't know what you did to those devils, but you sure stopped them in their tracks."

Denny had recovered consciousness. The trio hurried to his side.

"So they couldn't quite kill you?" Art grinned down at the space pilot.

"Weren't trying!" replied Denny briefly. "They seemed interested in the discoveries I'd made on Venus. Had the nicest ways of getting information; simple, too. All they had to do was touch my skin and I got a radium burn."

"You must have passed out just after I used the ray on them," Klalmar-lan commented. "But how did they get you in the first place?"

"Just slipped up behind us, showing a friendly signal, and slapped some kind of paralysis ray on us—went through the permirium hull and everything. They came aboard—but only took me off. The rest of the crew they left lying there, paralyzed. Then they just swung away a few miles and disintegrated the whole works. That was pretty tough to take—some of those boys had been to hell and back with me."

"They paid for that massacre," growled Klalmar-lan. "But that was only one of their countless thousands, perhaps millions of ships. I believe that they have a huge base on Venus, from which they are preparing to swoop down on Earth when the Ghlak-Ilek are ready. We will have to locate that base. Then we will radio the Martian Fleet. We have half a million ships, armed with choker rays and disintegrators. Long have we prepared to seize the treasure of Venus, and at the same time revenge ourselves on our ancient enemy. Speaking for the Greater Ring," and he drew himself up proudly, "I can promise you that we will fight as fiercely to save your race from extinction, though there be no gain, if it will in some measure alleviate the great wrong we have done you in leaving you unwarned and unprepared."

"THANK YOU, Klalmar-lan," answered Denny simply. "However, I've got to warn you—there's something rotten on our side of it. Those *Things* spoke English—and had a pretty fair knowledge of Earth science and Earth affairs."

"Yes, we know where the rotten spot is located," replied Klalmar-lan. "He's been building up a machinery against us for some time, unknown to some of you who worked nearest him. Got away with several of our secrets, too—the force field, for one—"

"The force field!" ejaculated Art.



"That's how he got Haight! Remember that night, Elene?"

"Of course," she cried. "Haight had found the secret of the Ghlak-Ileth and their high radium content."

"Yes," agreed Klalmar-lan, and that secret Dr. Theller knew he must suppress at all costs. The force field he no doubt projected as a beam through some hidden port in the laboratory roof. Playing it about like an invisible searchlight, he met the incoming flier with a barrier as effective as a stone wall."

"The Voornizar must have contacted him long ago, and made some kind of deal—probably offered him all the radium he could use," mused Art. "I would guess that he planned to establish a new laboratory on Venus—that's why he was so interested in that city you found, Denny—interested enough to discredit your story on Earth, and order you held by the Voornizar!"



"And to go a step farther," interjected Klalmar-lan, "I will wager that we find the Voornizar's base not so far from that city."

"What ghastly treachery!" gasped Elene. "To betray his own Mother Earth to annihilation. Already millions have died—"

Art, watching her, saw her freeze in silence. He tried to glance at the others, but his eyeballs would not move in their sockets. He tried to move; his whole body was gripped in a rigid paralysis! There was utter silence and stillness in the hurtling ship. Art's thoughts were racing. What fools they had been, flocking around Denny's bunk when he came to. They had totally neglected to watch the control panel, where the mass detector would have warned them of an approaching ship. Now they had been surprised and seized with the same deadly paralysis that had trapped Denny before.

The air lock swung inward. None of the four were surprised to see Dr. Theller

step through the port, keeping a careful distance between himself and the two grotesque monstrosities who followed him. Theller was without space suit or arms. Art stared with horrified fascination at the two Voornizar. The dazzling, white hot radiance that ceaselessly flowed from them made it difficult to identify their form. They seemed to have none; yet they could take any shape. Fundamentally, they were a tube about a foot in diameter and some seven feet high. They had a slit-like mouth near the top, and a huge crystalline eye which surmounted their exact top. They seemed to favor a bilateral form, although the number of pairs of arms appeared indeterminate. But as Art watched, above each slit mouth appeared a huge beak nose and above this, deep, staring sightless hollows. A horrible caricature of a human face! Demonic laughter came from the lipless mouth of one!

"SO YOU pitiful Martians had a weapon that would stop the Voornizar!" it boomed. "You fool, did you not know that we are immortal? Only when we lack radium can one of us die—and then, he only suspends animation until sustenance can be brought. I know not the principle of the thing you fashioned, although its effect is to halt radio-activity. Think ye that would kill us?" The thing's laughter roared. "We merely lay inert—waiting only for the next contact with a living Voornizar or any bit of active radium, to set our life process in motion once more. Think ye that you can fight a million mighty ships with such a harmless weapon?"

"Had you known that the transport you captured carried me, Dwalbuth, mighty Shan of the Voornizar, you might not have so carelessly left us drifting in space, to be found and revived by Dr. Theller."

"Before we release you from the paralysis," spoke up Theller, "I want to tell you that resistance is futile. These people can project, from that single eye, a ray of any frequency, ranging from ultraviolet to infra-red, and would have no trouble in burning you to a crisp in a fraction of a second. Also, as Pilot Denny has reason to know, their slightest touch will cause a severe burn." He searched Denny, still lying on the bunk, found nothing. He removed Art and Elene's electron pistols. From Klalmar-lan's belt he took the choker ray gun, gave it a contemptuous glance, and flung it squarely in Klalmar-lan's face, just as Dwalbuth flicked a bluish light from a tiny torch over the four, releasing them from the paralysis. Klalmar-lan caught the gun, staring down at it with dumb despair and sick disappointment written all over his handsome ebony face.

"We'll put them in my ship," said Theller, motioning them toward the lock. Denny rose and hobbled painfully along with them. "The Earth people I can use for helpers, if I can educate them to the practicability of such a course; the Martian I will destroy, after I have wrung from him a few of the secrets I need for my conquest of his planet."

## V

"**I** ASSURE YOU that these are the most comfortable accommodations to be found anywhere on Venus," commented Denny sardonically as he gazed around the dank cell in which the four found themselves imprisoned. "Speaking from experience, I mean that."

"This is your city, then, of which you spoke?" queried the Martian.

"Yes. I spent very little time in exploring it, however, as I was due to report back and was in a hurry. I do know that it's mostly underground, and of almost inconceivable antiquity, however. Of the nature of its former inhabitants, their language, or the name of the city, I could learn nothing."

"My guess that the Voornizar's base was in, or somewhere near this city was correct," asserted Klalmar-lan, dropping his voice. He glanced at the guard looming

outside the heavily barred metal door, and beckoned them to a far, gloomy corner of the dungeon. The Earth people were startled to hear a chuckle of fiendish glee. It came from the Martian! He was swinging his ray pistol by the trigger guard, shaking in nearly inaudible mirth.

"By the Two Moons! What ego!" he hissed, lapsing into his native tongue, which the others understood to some extent. "They have such contempt for my poor Martian brainchild, they do not even take it from me!"

"Well, it's practically useless, as near as I can see, against any number of the creatures," shrugged Elene. "I suppose we could knock out the guard, but the lock on the door is still impossible. The next Voornizar who comes along would revive him, and we'd only be in for more restrictions."

"Ah, but you do not understand. Watch." A lizzard-like reptile had run down the slimy wall, paused at the bottom. Klalmar-lan aimed the gun at it, pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. "That was the choker ray. Now, observe—I move this little catch here, press the button again." There was a little frying sound. A puff of vapor rose above the lizard, and it shrank instantly to a blackened lump. The Earthians stared in amazement.

Art finally found voice. "How did you do it?"

"Simple—a disintegrator. Result, the disintegration is only begun, when it is cut off. No explosion. Only a few elements in the victim begin to go, but the molecular structure is broken down nevertheless. I can set it for any degree I want."

"Dwalbuth called me a fool, but it is he who is stupid in his conceit. Immortal! Bah! There is nothing that cannot be disintegrated."

"Then I move; we get out of here, right now!" whispered Art vehemently. "People are dying on Earth, every minute."

"Right," agreed Denny. "Let's go." He limped to the door. "Say, guard—"

Standing behind him, the gun hidden, Klalmar-lan poured the rays over the Voornizar, through Denny, door and all. The creature slumped heavily to the floor, its fiery luminescence fading to a dull

leaden gray. Klalmar-lan stepped forward, turned up his disintegrator, and impassively played the beam over the Thing on the floor, until nothing remained but a heap of blackened slag. Then he went to work on the lock. In a moment they were free. Art kicked the ashes of the guard into a dark, obscure corner of the cell.

"WE'VE GOT to find our way to the upper level, get to a televisor somehow," panted Klalmar-lan, as they hurried up the inclined passage-way.

"Don't know if I can remember all the twists and turns we followed when they brought us down or not," Denny puzzled. "How about you, Art?" Art shook his head doubtfully.

"You intend to bring the Martian fleet here—that is, if you can contact them?" Elene inquired of Klalmar-lan.

"No—not here—to Earth! While they are neutralizing the Khlak-Ileth there, we must in some way hold off the menace here."

"You're right," Art agreed. "The fleet can't fight off a million Voornizar ships and kill the Khlak-Ileth, too. And it's imperative that they get to Earth with no delay."

Through pitch black corridors, twisting, climbing, dropping again, the party groped their way. Art had a tiny torch, which he risked flashing on occasionally, but this helped little. All hope of retracing their steps was soon abandoned. The lower levels of the ancient city had been a veritable labyrinth. Realizing that they were hopelessly lost, they stopped to take stock of the situation. Leaning against a dank, moss grown wall, Art felt something slimy brush his leg. He flashed on his light, and his sanity reeled. He saw a great, rat-like figure, the size of man on his knees! The eye in its humanoid face were closed against the light—its teeth were bared in the snarl of a cornered rat. Then it scuttled away clumsily. Great God! It was a man shambling on his knees, naked and unclean!

Art heard a little moan of horror—Elene had turned away, her face in her hands.

"Did you see it, Klalmar-lan?" he muttered hoarsely to the Martian.

"Yes, my friend," was the sad reply. "I believe we have witnessed all that is left of the glory that was Venus. A skulking creature of the sewers—creeping on its knees." He shuddered. "They nearly did that to us once—and they will do it to Earth, if we do not find a way out of here soon."

There was a metallic rattle, far down the corridor, and a livid, glowing stab of light appeared. It was a Voornizar, running—the empty cell had been found.

"It's all right," hissed Art, "he can't possibly see us. Here we have the advantage." Klalmar-lan grimly drew his ray gun, but Art halted him. "Wait—I've got a plan. You stick here. Keep out of sight. The rest of us will give ourselves up. We'll try to get him to take us to Dwalbuth or Theller. Then you follow. See?"

Klalmar-lan nodded silently, stepped back into the shadows. Grasping Elene and Denny by the hand, Art ran toward the Voornizar, shouting.

"Get us out of this horrible place before we go mad!" he croaked. Elene managed a sob or two. The Voornizar grinned evilly at their panic, then peered behind them.

"Where is the Martian?" he snarled.

"We got separated in the dark some time ago—never could locate him again," Art answered.

"We'll find him; he can't go far," rasped the creature. "Meanwhile, I will take you to Dwalbuth, who will see that you suffer adequately for this attempt at escape. In the absence of the Earthman, who wants to preserve you as his assistants, our Mighty Shan will dispose of you as he sees fit."

The guard carried a powerful torch, and had no trouble in finding the way out of the pits. They entered a level which had evidently been the quarters of the well-to-do class of ancients. There were many furnishings and decorations, most of which were badly faded and deteriorated. Hosts of Voornizar were hurrying about on various errands. Dwalbuth had evidently established headquarters here, from which he superintended the preparation of the huge radium fleet. How Klalmar-lan would ever follow them through this swarming hive was beyond Art.

THE GUARD led them to a huge room where Dwalbuth was snarling orders to a group of his lieutenants. On sighting the Earthmen, he dismissed his henchmen.

"Perhaps," he began, "I have not made it clear to you just how insignificant you, and your form of life, is in our scheme of things. We have wiped out many races stronger than you, on a score of planets, in my time. We are strong, immortal; you are weak, you suffer pain easily. Do not try my patience with any more escape attempts. And you had better tell me what you have done with that guard." There was only silence. He screamed, "*What did you do with that guard?*" A great three-toed claw, or hand, shot out, stopped an inch from Elene's terror-stricken face.

"I have heard that your men consider you beautiful to look upon," sneered Dwalbuth, "I will change that face to a seared mask if you do not tell me, immediately." Then Art leaped. He threw himself on the arm with its grasping claw, bore it down. White hot, burning agony shot through his hands and arms. Then, miraculously, it stopped. Dwalbuth was sagging to the floor. But there came a vicious crackling as the guard whirled to train his heat ray on them. Then he, too, collapsed. Klalmar-lan stood in the door, grinning as he switched on his disintegrator.

"Fasten this door the best you can," he commanded, "while I finish off these two. Hate to take the time, but we can't risk their recovering." This done, he stepped to the televisior, dialled his commander-in-chief in the Greater Ring's Martian stronghold. In a few terse words, he explained the situation and sent the fleet hurtling toward Earth. By this time, a great pounding had begun at the door. But the Earthians had not been idle—they had been searching frantically for an exit. And Elene had found one, a tiny passageway behind a once secret, but now half-rotted-away panel. They scrambled into it, crawled for a short way. Then the tunnel debouched into a larger corridor in which they could stand up and run. Luckily, it was crooked, and winding; for they heard the angry snap and hiss of searching heat rays not far behind.

"Watch this," said Klalmar-lan, turn-

ing his disintegrator up higher. A Voornizar appeared around a corner, and exploded with a muffled roar.

"Don't get the mixture too rich!" laughed Art as the fragments showered around them. "Say, Klalmar-lan, how in biases did you get through that mob to follow us?"

"Easy," grinned the black man. "When you came out on that level, I was lurking close behind. There was nothing for me to do but fall right in with you. If you had looked around, you'd have seen me right at your elbow. Of course, when you came to the door of Dwalbuth's staff room, I dropped out, and just stood outside the door, acting the part of a bored prisoner, until the fun started."

Art chuckled at the Martian's audacity. The sounds of pursuit were getting fainter behind them. The Voornizar were learning new respect for their once despised captives.

The tunnel now narrowed down to a width which made it passable by one person only, and ran perfectly straight. The party formed in single file, Klalmar-lan bringing up the rear. Denny led, with Art's flash, as Art was nursing scorched hands and arms.

"They'll be getting after us with that paralysis ray directly," Art worried. "What do you say to blocking the tunnel? We can surely depend on its emerging somewhere."

"The War Gods help us if *they* know where it comes out! But I think you've got an idea there," agreed Klalmar-lan, turning his ray on the roof of the tunnel a good distance behind them. It crumbled, slowly at first, then gave way with a roar, the fragments of rock and masonry completely choking the aperture. Klalmar-lan did not stop until he had filled the passage for a good hundred feet.

"We can get back through there, if we have to, by using this gun, but the Voornizar will have to dig or bore their way. Their disintegrators are like yours of Earth—uncontrolled. They are useful out in space for destroying an enemy space ship at a distance, but one blast under ground here would set off enough thermal energy to blow this whole city off the green face of Venus."

DENNY was crouching on the floor. "Look at this!" he exclaimed. His tiny flash revealed fresh marks in the damp sand which covered the floor at that point. They were blurred, and had no resemblance to human footprints.

"At least one Voornizar passed this way," commented Klalmar-lan, "but my guess is that Dwalbuth made these tracks, and was the only one who knew the secret of this passage."

"It's a sure thing it's leading us to some place of importance—Dwalbuth didn't take this walk for the fresh air," Denny contributed.

The tunnel's length seemed interminable, although Art estimated they had not covered over four or five Earth miles. They found a tiny spring of pure water trickling down the moss-shrouded stone wall, and drank gratefully. Their lunch consisted of a few food tablets which Art had been carrying.

At last a dim glow of light appeared ahead. Advancing warily, they found the passage ran squarely into a plate metal barrier, which leaned away from them at a slight angle. About head height, there was a small ragged hole burned into it, through which came the light they had seen. Denny applied his eyes to this.

"Smokin' Mercury!" he exclaimed, sotto voice. "Get a load of this, Art!" Art looked. The sight was awesome. Far below, and stretching into the dim distance, was a vast cavern. As far as the eye could see, its floor was covered with huge silvery shapes—the mighty cruisers of the Voornizar. Their close-packed ranks seemed to stretch for miles into the darkness. The only light was the luminescence of the ships themselves. The great domed roof was shrouded with gloom. The vantage point from which Art looked seemed to be located high in the curved side, and the metal barricade against which the tunnel ended was actually the shell of the Gargantuan cavity.

Klalmar-lan then had a quick glance, then turned to them, elated.

"This is it! We've stumbled on the main pool. There must be nearly a million ships down there."

Elene was looking now—she was unable to see any egress through which the ships

could be trundled to the surface. Doubtless there was a ramp or elevator of some sort, probably on the far side beyond their range of vision. Many Voornizar were moving among the great hulks, servicing them, effecting minor repairs.

"We are now probably well outside the city proper," continued Klalmar-lan. "Apparently this was once a great assembly hall, where huge mass meetings or possibly some kind of sporting events, were held. Some ancient king, wishing to spy upon the doings of his subjects unobserved, caused this passageway to be dug and the peephole to be cut. Dwalbuth, in turn, utilized it for somewhat the same purpose."

"Looks like the work of a twentieth-century acetylene torch," laughed Denny.

"That might afford an excellent clue as to the comparative development of their civilization," agreed Klalmar-lan gravely. "But enough theorizing. We must utterly destroy all these ships. Wait here."

They watched as he moved back through the tunnel a short distance. He trained his pistol on the wall. Rapidly a hole began to appear.

"It can't be far to the surface," he told them. "I'm going to burn a tunnel upward at a steep angle. Keep a good watch in both directions." Just then Art, his eye glued to the opening, saw that something was amiss below. The Voornizar were running about excitedly. Faintly he heard their discordant shouting, and the crackle of heat rays. Then he saw, skimming and swerving above the rows of giant ships, a familiar sight! Klalmar-lan's own spaceship, in which they had originally embarked from Earth! Wildly, it plunged toward Art, then swung erratically away and headed in a steep climb for the top of the dome. Several small patrol fliers appeared, racing in pursuit. Searchlights lanced through the blackness, illuminating the heretofore invisible ceiling, which was apparently just what the pilot of Klalmar-lan's ship hoped for. A passing searchlight beam revealed for an instant a round, jagged hole in the center of the room; the little rocket ship shot through it like an escaping minnow. The hole had evidently been newly made by the Voornizar for the passage of their smaller and more maneuverable craft, a half dozen of which

now flashed through in pursuit.

Art turned and related what he had seen.

"THAT WAS Theller, or I'm not a broken down space eater," growled Denny, "Here, let me spell you on that excavation work a while, Klalmar-lan." Klalmar-lan had a tough job—it was getting more difficult as the hole progressed. Hot gobbets of molten lava came splashing down from time to time, preventing him from entering the hole and following up his work. Acrid, choking fumes began to fill the tunnel, but Klalmar-lan refused to let Denny or Art take over, on account of their burned hands. It was two hours before daylight began to show, fifty feet above.

"Now, while those rocks are cooling sufficiently for us to crawl out, I'll show you what my plan is," said Klalmar-lan. "Has anyone a chrono?" Elene slipped one from her wrist, handed it to him. Quickly, he slipped it out of its case, began removing various parts. He attached it to the trigger ring of his pistol, made a delicate adjustment. Then he set the gun to full disintegrator. He rigged it so that the muzzle pointed through the peephole, aimed at the ships below.

"We've got six hours to get out of here and put plenty of miles between us and this place," he informed them. Hurriedly they scrambled up the chimney he had made. The rock had cooled rapidly, as it was pouring rain above, and water ran down in little rivulets. The four of them were drenched by the time they reached the surface. The rain was beating down in such a torrent that they could hardly get their breath. It was warm, like a tepid shower. It was difficult to see more than a few feet, but it was evident that they were in thick jungle.

"Let's head West," shouted Denny. "There's a bay that runs in here, toward the city. We came in that way before, from the sea. Shouldn't be far from here. If we can get on the open beach, it'll be lots better going than this damned jungle." With this they had to agree, and no time was lost in plunging into the jungle in the direction he had indicated. The four were now weaponless, and would have fallen easy prey to any one of a dozen

varieties of carnivorous monsters who habitually roamed the forest. But the creatures evidently did not consider the rain conducive to good hunting, and so they were unmolested. Two hours of exhausting struggle brought them out on the beach, which had not been over a mile away.

"Now we can make time," said Denny. "This narrow strip of beach will take us almost straight away from the space port for about twenty miles."

"We'll do our best to cover it in the four hours we have left," Art chuckled. They set out at a rapid clip, keeping a wary eye on both jungle and sea, from either of which might spring sudden death at any moment. The rain stopped, but lead-colored clouds still swirled overhead, for Venus was eternally overcast. Plenty of drinking water was to be found in the hollows of huge leaves—but the need for food was becoming keen with all of them. Still, they did not dare tarry long enough to find sustenance.

"There are a few species of fish in these waters which I know to be edible," explained Denny. "When it's safe to stop, we can catch a few."

"YOU MAY STOP right now!" commanded a harsh voice from behind them. They whirled—there, in the fringe of the jungle, his gray hair awry, his eyes glittering with desperation, stood Doctor Theller, covering them with the wide mouth of an electronic pistol.

"You—the Martian—I need your services. Come along—there's no time to lose. The rest of you come, too." There was nothing to do but trudge ahead of him through the jungle in the direction he indicated. There, as they had expected, lay Klalmar-lan's ship.

"You are having a little trouble with my ship?" inquired the Martian insolently, winking at his comrades.

"Yes, damn you—and you're going to fix it!" snarled the scientist. "It was necessary for me to fly through a narrow opening—I grazed the edge slightly. Two of the starboard main propulsion jets were sheared away. I had no trouble losing my pursuers in the mist, but when I cut in the main jets to leave the atmosphere, I merely looped about in crazy



trajectories. The right adjustment of the firing pattern would compensate for this, but I could not find it. On one of my own ships, yes, but this confounded Martian oddity is beyond my understanding. I had to drop down here, and attempt to trace out the connections from the firing panel. This I have been unable to do. You will do it for me!"

"Apparently you no longer occupy your former position of esteem with the Voor-nizar," mocked Art.

"Get in the ship!" snapped Theller, glancing sharply at them. "You, Klalmar-lan, pilot the ship. Set the course for Mars."

"Mårs!"

"Yes. We will land in a remote area, where we will pose as refugees from Earth. That is, all of us except Klalmar-lan, of whom I will dispose before reaching there. I am not beaten yet. I have friends there, and with the secrets I have learned of the Martian weapons and defenses, I will be able to build anew."

Art stepped forward, ignoring the threatening gun muzzle. "Doctor Theller, it strikes me that you are in no position to dictate terms to us. You are in as great a danger as we, how great a danger, you do not even dream. Only Klalmar-lan can pilot this crippled ship. This he can, and will, refuse to do. Now here are our terms. We will take you to Mars alive, where we will turn you over to the authorities." Art was loath to reveal as yet that they could set their course for Earth and arrive there in perfect safety. "You do not dare kill any of us."

"Don't I?" sneered the scientist. "Watch me. If Klalmar-lan does not get into that pilot seat before I count ten, I will blast Elene to a cinder. Then I will kill you, Art. Then Denny. When only Klalmar-lan is left, I will destroy him by inches, burning away a hand or foot at a time." The electronic pistol swung toward Elene and he began counting. White-faced, Art motioned despairingly to Klalmar-lan. The Martian's black eyes were obsidian as he silently strapped himself in the seat. The rest followed, Doctor Theller last, his pistol covering them. Suddenly there was a sickening lurch, a numbing crash, and blackening oblivion.

## VI

THROUGH a dull, throbbing ache, Art began to wonder where he was. His body seemed first to be spinning in a vast void, and yet again seemed to be pinned against a hard cold surface. He felt repeated small shocks, as of missiles striking him. From a distance a voice was calling insistently. Rubbing sticky blood from his eyes, he saw a greater flat expanse stretching away above him. Then his eyes focused. It was the deck of the fier! And there at its far end sat Klalmar-lan in the pilot seat! He was looking over his shoulder, calling, "Art! Art! Get that ray pistol! Quickly!" Art looked about him sluggishly. He saw the gun lying only a few feet from his face. But beyond it, there was a crawling figure—a mad ravening thing whose clawlike hand was even now extended to grasp the weapon! Art tried to move—he could not budge. Something was pinning him down—the body of Denny. He heaved desperately, but the man seemed to weigh tons. The truth of the situation came to Art. The ship was still within the gravity of Venus, and accelerating at a rate far beyond that of normal flight. The inexorable force of the acceleration was pressing the four passengers against the rear panel of the ship. Klalmar-lan could not leave his pilot's seat, for he would never be able to return! And even then, Theller's hand was closing on the grip of the pistol. The rocket ship spun on its longitudinal axis like a giant gyroscope. Art felt himself thrown from wall to wall, battered and bruised, but miraculously retaining consciousness. He was free now, of the encumbrance. The whirling stopped, and he drew himself painfully to a sitting position. He looked wildly around for the gun. It was nowhere to be seen; but Theller, pulling a long, bodkin-like dagger from his boot, was close upon him. The dagger was raised for the plunge into Art's unprotected heart, but there came a low hum from the front of the ship. Theller collapsed, his muscles constricted into taut bands of agony by the shock ray.

And Art's pain-wracked body once more found the peace of oblivion.

Sounds of laughter and conversation

finally woke him again. Relaxed and refreshed, he knew that he had slept long. He sat up in the bunk. He was swathed in bandages, and medications had eased the pain of his bruises and burns. Elene and Denny, also heavily bandaged, were watching him smilingly. Klalmar-lan came toward him from the pilot's seat.

"You're a fine pilot!" roared Art, in mock fury. "That was about the worst take-off I have ever seen!" Klalmar-lan ruefully had to admit that it was pretty bad.

"I had to do it, though, Art," he said. "It was our only chance. I watched out of the corner of my eye. As soon as you were in, I threw on the main jets, full power, thinking to leave Theller behind, but I didn't time it quite right. He had managed to get in first. Of course, you were all thrown heavily against the rear panel, which, being padded, prevented serious injury. Naturally, we all blacked out for a time from the acceleration. We had passed through the cloud layer before I myself regained consciousness. Just in time to see the most beautiful sight! The rear mirrorgraph showed the whole thing. The clouds, which extend a full six miles above Venus' surface, parted like a puff of smoke, and a huge flower of white flame, miles in diameter, sprang up at us.

"The concussion boosted our speed at a terrific rate. But I discovered that at least three Voornizar fighters had been scattered far enough to avoid destruction, and were now speeding in savage pursuit. When I saw Theller coming to, and crawling after that gun, I didn't know what to do for a moment. I couldn't leave the cockpit and expect to return without neutralizing our tremendous acceleration, which meant leveling off, in which case our pursuers would be on us instantly.

"I shouted at you, threw pieces of my harness, anything to rouse you. You finally woke, but Theller practically had the pistol by that time. I spun the ship over a couple of times, which was cruel punishment for all of you, but necessary. Well, I thought all was over when I saw Theller about to knife you. But spinning the ship had dislodged something from under the seat which Theller had evidently fastened there previously—a shock ray

pistol. I paralyzed him with that. In a few hours we were out of Venus' gravity, and I was able to leave the controls and revive the four of you." He strode to a bunk where Theller lay, securely bound.

"**A**ND NOW, I think you'd better tell me what happened to those two Martian ships which disappeared enroute to Earth. At the time, knowing of the secrets you had stolen from us, but nothing of your connection with Voornizar, we were forced to regard it as an act of war on the part of Earth, and cut off communications until we could investigate it in our own way. Now it is obvious that you gave their schedule to the Voornizar and had them intercepted."

"They disintegrated every trace of both of them!" shrieked the murderer. "And I'm glad, glad, do you hear? I'd like to destroy everything Martian! If my plan had gone right, some day I would have brought you black devils to your knees. Knowing that I cannot do that, I only want death."

"That wish you shall have—for on Mars a death sentence awaits you," Klalmar-lan answered grimly.

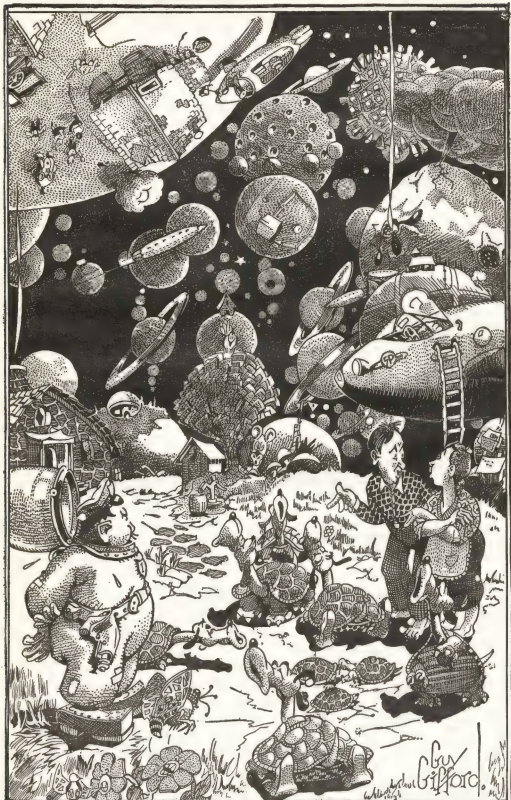
"On Mars?" asked Art swiftly. "But Klalmar-lan, Elene and I must get to Earth. Even though the danger is over, we are badly needed for the work of rebuilding and reorganizing. And—besides—we, well, hang it all, we want to find someone to marry us."

"Don't worry, my friends," Klalmar-lan assured them. "You shall go to Earth. In about two hours we will meet a Martian patrol which left Mars for Venus at the same time the fleet left for Earth. I will transfer to their ship with my prisoner, leaving you mine. I hope you will not object to my taking an Earthian to Mars for trial—but my only motive is to save the trouble of a trial when you will want to be devoting your efforts to more important work."

"He's right," agreed Denny, "and here's another thing. Don't worry about getting back to Earth to get married. Have you forgotten that I'm a full commander, with the right to marry any couple aboard a ship in space?"

Art and Elene hadn't forgotten.

# THE RINGERS HAVE NEIGHBOR TROUBLE



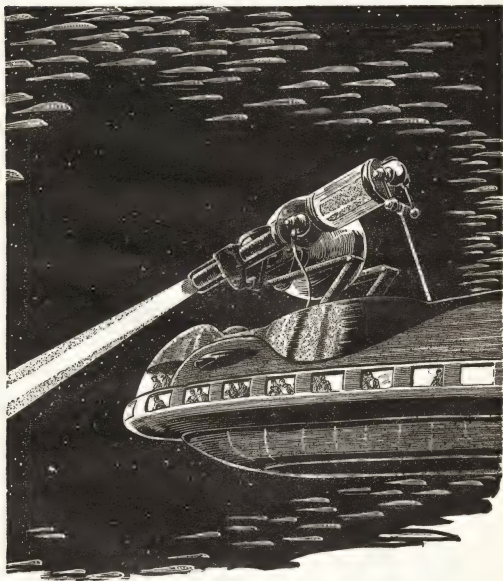
"THE SARGE SAYS WE GOTTA KEEP THOSE SHELL HOUNDS FROM BARKIN' AT THE MOON. THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE ARE COMPLAINING!"

# Joe Carson's Weapon

By JAMES R. ADAMS

**From Mars they had come, these vanguards of a ruthless horde that would conquer Earth—if they could steal the weapon of Joe Carson's fertile mind.**

*Illustration by PAUL*



*Spacers would hover, their mighty weapons blaring forth.*

**J**OE CARSON grinned broadly and again reread his letter to the editor of *Galactic Adventures*. *Galactic Adventures* was Joe's favorite science-fiction

magazine and he had spent many happy hours roaming the cold of space and inventing ponderous machines through the medium of its pages.

The latest issue lay open on the desk before him, its garish cover mercifully hidden from view. The cover was Joe's main reason for writing his missive, although he had several minor motives, not the least of them being his desire to see his name in print. The book was opened to the readers' section, which contained various vituperative gripes, complaints and kicks in the pants for the editor, intermingled with gushy, complimentary notes that praised the magazine to high heaven. Boy! That one from Henry Snade (*The Obscure Organism*) was a lulu. It told the editor, in no uncertain terms, where to go and gave half a page of reasons why he should never return.

Joe had all but bashed his brains out trying to pen a letter half as entertaining as the one from Snade and now his eyes flickered with appreciation as he scanned the product of his efforts.

Ye Humble Ed:

Once again the keeper has negligently left my door unlatched and I slyly crawl from my cage, drawn by one, irrevocable purpose. Glancing hither and yon, to make sure I am unobserved, I dash to the fence and clear it with a prodigious leap that carries me half way to the corner drug-store.

Snatching a tricycle from a gawping kid, I push his face in the mud and pedal furiously the remaining distance to the store. Leaping off, I rush in and batter my way through the screaming throng, shouting imprecations at all who stand in my way.

Panting with exhaustion, I at last reach my goal and clutch it to my breast. The crowd surges forward and frantic hands grab at the prize.

"It's mine! All mine!" I shout in their faces. "No one can take it from me!"

Galloping madly from the store I race swiftly across yards and up alleys, quickly losing the howling mob in the distance. Squatting under a street-lamp, I sneak a triumphant look at the treasure. What is it? Yep, you guessed it—*Galactic Adventures*!

But—shades of Major Mars!—what is that horrible monstrosity on the cover? A BEM, no less . . . an abominable, wretched BEM. Why, oh why, can't we have at least one different cover painting? Wesley is no good. Get Marlini or Sidney to do the covers. I don't mind a BEM now and then, but a steady diet of them soon palls on the palate. (Heh heh.) All joking aside, your covers are terrific.

Now we come to the task of rating the stories. Only one stands out in my mind as being of excellent quality. I refer to Arthur M. Ron's super-epic, *The Infinite Finite*. The other stories paled into insignificance in comparison to this classic. More power to Ron! *Percival's Puissant Pulverizer* and *Nothing Is Something* follow Ron's story in that order. The rest are not worth mentioning.

The interior illustrations are somewhat better than the cover, although, for the most part,

they are inaccurate and do not follow the themes of the stories. Ye gods! Can't your artists read? So much for the art, which wasn't so much.

SAY! What does that jerk, *The Amphibious Android*, mean by calling me a "mere child"? His assertion that I'm but a youth of fifteen is a good way off the beam. I've been reading *Galactic Adventures* for the past eight years and I was nine years old when I picked up my first copy, so figure it out for yourself. A jug of sour *zeni* to him. May fire burst out in his s. f. collection and utterly destroy it. No! I retract that. That's too horrible a fate, even to visit upon *The Amphibious Android*. Let him wallow in his ignorance. I, *The Super Intellect*, will smile down on him and forgive him his sins.

That's an interesting letter from Charlie Lane. *The Miserable Mutant* has propounded an amazing theory that has set me to wondering. Perhaps G. A. can induce one of its authors to work this theory into a story. I'm reserving my four wooden nickels right now for the tale, if it is written. I'll even suggest a title—*Those Who Are Froze In The Cosmos*. How's that? Well, I didn't like it either.

Once again I tear my hair and roar: GIVE US TRIMMED EDGES! Ye Ed must know by now that the majority of fandom is in favor of trimmed edges. As it is, one comes suddenly to the most interesting part of a story, at the very bottom of a page and spends several moments feverishly attempting to gain a hold on the ragged edge and go on to the next passage. By the time he has accomplished this, he is a raving lunatic, a martyr to trimmed edges. I am not a crusader, as is *The Misled Biped*, but I insist on seeing justice done.

As a whole, this is a fair issue. I might even call it good, if it were not for the artwork and stories. Ron's epic will live forever in my mind, although its ending was rather weak and it could have been developed into a more powerful tale by having the Slads all die in the Inferno.

I enter my plea for longer stories. A long novel by M. S. Jensen would be appreciated. His last, *Dr. Higbawm's Strange Manifestation*, was a gem. On the other hand, short stories are not without merit and good old G. A. wouldn't be the same without them. I believe the story policy had best remain as is.

Give Higgins a rest. His yarns are rapidly degenerating into hack, with only four out of the last five meeting with this reader's approval. I don't like to be finicky, but it seems like he isn't contributing his best material to G. A.

Well, this missive is growing to huge proportions and I would like to see it in print, so I'd better sign off.

Oh, yeh, almost forgot to comment on the departments. They are all good, with *The Reader's Opinion* being the most interesting. Ye Ed's ruminations come in for a close second. Do not change the departments in any way, although the quiz and the *Strange Phenomena* feature could be discontinued, without any great loss.

Before I close, I wish to make a revelation which will rock the world. Yes, Ed, I have a secret weapon! Nothing can stand against this terrible invention and, with it, I could even destroy Earth, with Mars and Pluto thrown in for good measure. Beware, Ed, lest you arouse my ire and cause me, in my wrath, to unleash this vast force upon helpless, trusting mankind.

Having read G. A. from cover to cover, I crawl back to my cage, drooling with delight.



Prying up a loose stone in the center of the floor, I tenderly deposit the mag among the other issues of my golden hoard. Replacing the stone, I sigh contentedly and manipulate my lower lip with two fingers to indicate complete satisfaction. See you next issue!

Joe Carson  
*The Super Intellect*

Joe carefully placed the letter in a previously addressed envelope, mentally complimenting himself for authoring such a masterpiece. Slapping a stamp on the back, he sealed the envelope and rushed forth to post it at the nearest mail-box.

**H**ARL and Kir-Um slowly materialized and glanced about to take stock of their surroundings. They were on the roof of some tall building and night pressed in all about them, relieved only by the intermittent winking of a huge neon sign anchored on the roof.

They had come from far off Mars to draw out and discover the weaknesses of Earth—for the Great Invasion was not far in the offing and the Grand Councilor had deemed it wise to know in advance where best to strike and in what manner.

Mars was in its final death throes and its inhabitants must soon immigrate to a new world or perish. Their sister planet, Earth, was best adapted to their particular form of life, thus it had been selected for subjugation to their purpose.

The atoms that were Harl and Kir-Um were hurled, in a state of fluidity, through space, to be reassembled on Earth. For the purpose of escaping detection, they had assumed the bodies of terrestrials and now they stood, staring triumphantly out over this world that was soon to be theirs. The conquering hordes would follow later in spaceships, as soon as Harl and Kir-Um had gathered the necessary data.

Harl spoke—mastering the strange vocal-cords with an ease that amazed him. To be sure, he spoke an alien, unintelligible tongue. We translate:

"Well, Kir-Um, what now? We have arrived at our destination, but I haven't the slightest idea what to do next."

Kir-Um pondered this a moment and eventually answered: "The situation suggests we first descend to the surface of this world and, from there, perhaps we can map a line of attack."

"E-e-e-ump!" Harl made the noise,

which, on Mars, denoted extreme pleasure. "Excellent, Kir-Um. How can a decadent civilization, such as this one undoubtedly is, stand against such brilliant minds as ours?"

"You are right, as usual, Harl," Kir-Um agreed. "My analysis of the problem was only typical of a Martian. Now, let us proceed to the base of this crude structure."

By diligent search, they finally located a stair leading downward and cautiously made their way into the bowels of the building.

Reaching the fifth floor, Kir-Um placed a restraining hand on Harl's shoulder and pointed excitedly to a door at the far end of the hall. Light streamed from beneath it and glowed faintly through the frosted glass panel set in its upper half.

Scarcely daring to breathe, they approached the door and stood, regarding it with apprehensive eyes. Harl noted the gold-leaf lettering on the glass panel, but the cryptic legend had no meaning to his Martian mind. But, to an Earthly member of that rabid army known as scientification fans, the words would have brought a tinge of awe. For this was the room where far-flung systems were denied existence, by one shake of a firm, unyielding head; where the most expressive cuss-words of super villains were brutally censored with a fiendish swipe of a little, blue pencil—the editorial office of *Galactic Adventures*.

"Harl," Kir-Um whispered softly. "There's a creature in that room! Do you not detect its thought vibrations?"

Harl opened his mind to reception and stood a moment, as if in a trance. His eyes slowly dilated and he gasped in astonishment.

"Yes, Kir-Um, there is a creature in there. A strange, horrible creature, possessed of mad, meaningless thoughts. I—I wonder what it looks like?"

**K**IR-UM pointed to a small, oddly-shaped aperture, which undoubtedly was some sort of device for locking the door. Hesitantly he stepped forward and placed his eye to the hole.

Inside the room, Newt Jorgsen, the building's janitor, was hugely enjoying the contents of a letter he had retrieved from the wastebasket. Tears streamed from his



blurry eyes and his bent, bony shoulders shook with spasms of laughter. His gunboat feet were planted firmly on the editor's desk and a tall bottle of beer, smuggled in by devious means and of which Newt was inordinately fond, sat on the floor at his side. The letter was from one Joe Carson and the mirth it provoked almost caused Newt to spill from his precarious perch and brought numerous, gleeful shouts of, "Oh, Yimminy!" from his foam-flecked lips.

Kir-Um stared in amazement at this tableau and uttered a quick, staccato, "Ickly-unc!" Luckily, Newt did not hear the Martian's expression of surprise, but continued his perusal of the letter.

Kir-Um drew back and silently motioned Harl to look. Harl sucked in his breath, but dutifully bent forward to the door. Newt had just placed the bottle to his lips and Harl gasped with horror as he half-emptied it, with one, tremendous gulp. On Mars, such wanton waste of moisture would be punished with swift death, without benefit of trial. But this wasn't Mars: this was Earth, the planet of abundance.

Kir-Um plucked at Harl's sleeve. "Why do we cringe at the sight of this *creature*, Harl?" he whispered. "After all, it is no more repulsive than are these wretched bodies we have nobly assumed, for the glory of our race. We are great, Harl. Unselfishly, we have foregone the pleasures and conveniences of our magnificent physiques, so that our civilization might once again take its rightful place in the destiny of our System."

Harl's mind wistfully conjured a picture of his own, splendid body, with its bulbous head, sleek, furry torso and many sensitive tentacles, and he sighed heavily. "Yes, we are truly martyrs. My only regret is, I have but nine tentacles to give for my species."

The two ceased their council of self-glorification and stood "listening" to the thoughts of the Being inside. Their first impression was that the Earthman was insane, so the mad cogitations of his mind would indicate. Such random notions as: "Corner drugstore . . . BEM . . . Amphibious Android . . . Trimmed edges . . ." had no significance to them. But, quite suddenly, they picked up a thought that electrified their very beings and caused

a quick glance of fear to pass between them. At the same time, it was a glance of elation, for here they had found what was probably Earth's most invulnerable armament. Instantly, they concentrated on the astonishing thought unraveling in the creature's brain.

Newt had reached the next to the last paragraph of Joe Carson's letter and he was now reading it, with great enthusiasm. The hearty chuckles it gave Newt were lost on the Martians, for they did not know the meaning of humor. They understood only that here was the greatest force against which they would have to contend; the biggest obstacle in the path of the coming invasion; a barrier that would have to be battered down and made impotent.

"This is incredible, Harl," Kir-Um whispered in awe. "Imagine it—a weapon powerful enough to destroy all Earth! With such a thing, they could completely annihilate our invading forces."

"It causes me no little alarm," Harl agreed. "I can't conceive of such a fantastic weapon, but perhaps these Earthlings possess more intelligence than we give them credit for. Perhaps they have anticipated our invasion and have prepared for it."

"Harl," Kir-Um said with great solemnity, "I believe we are standing in a citadel of science. A place where great, new theories and devices are propounded and deliberated. And that *creature* in there is the guiding hand of this stronghold of knowledge. The letter he is reading was undoubtedly written by the highest intellect of this world. As you say, this genius may have foreseen our coming and moved to nullify it. Spurred on by desperation, he created this marvelous weapon and thought to surprise our onrushing, confident armies with an impregnable defense. Quite by chance, we have stumbled upon this dastardly plot, before it could be brought to bear."

"But what can we do?" Harl despaired. "The letter does not reveal the nature of this weapon. How can we combat something of which we know absolutely nothing? I am of the opinion we should abandon our conquest and die a slow, peaceful death on our own aging world."

Kir-Um deliberated this advice, the deciding factor being a vision of the Grand Councilor rising up in all his wrath

and condemning the two who had brought the bad news.

"No, Harl. The Grand Councilor might not approve of such a course. To suggest such a thing would be to admit we have failed, and the Councilor does not tolerate failure. Without thought of the consequences, he might order us executed and deprive our planet of two of its greatest minds. No, that won't do."

"We have no alternative," Harl pointed out, still whispering. "We cannot stand against such a weapon, and better to sacrifice ourselves than have our entire space fleet meet with destruction. If only our armies could come through the Ato-Decomposera Twunend-Materializationa Tuthereend, perhaps we could surprise these scheming Earthlings and overwhelm them, before they could bring this tremendous force into play. But, unfortunately, we don't have the metal to build enough of the machines."

Kir-Um nodded thoughtfully. "No, we can't stand against this weapon. But we can gain possession of it and put it to our own use!"

Harl stared uncomprehendingly at Kir-Um. "You mean, ferret out this genius and force him to divulge the plans of his invention?"

There was a gleam in Kir-Um's eye now. "Not only that, we'll secure a working model and take it with us, to study and build from. No doubt the weapon is complicated and, in this manner, we can gain first-hand knowledge of its working."

"E-e-e-ump," Harl murmured softly. "Good, good, Kir-Um. It amazes me that I didn't think of the very same thing. But, of course, you're one hundred and thirty nine years older than I and, naturally, your mind is more alert."

"Naturally," Kir-Um nodded. "But to get back to more vital matters . . . We shall go to this Joe Carson, who, according to the thoughts of that *creature* inside, resides in a place called Majestic, Maine. I also receive the impression this town is three hundred miles north of here, in a straight line. The problem of transportation is easily solved; we will purloin some sort of vehicle for the purpose. Once there, we shall question this intellect, under influence of a hypnotic sleep, and lay bare his secret. The plan will move forward

of its own momentum then. Let us go."

The two alien beings from a far world eventually gained the ground floor and, easily forcing the, to them, crude lock, made their way out into the night.

For a long moment, they stood, looking up at the black, impassive sky. Something within their hearts called out to the mocking void for reassurance; pleading for a tiny shred of encouragement. But no answer came from the hollow emptiness that surrounded them.

Then, placing a thumb and finger to their nostrils, in the ageless Martian gesture signifying complete unity of purpose, Harl and Kir-Um strode forth to meet the destiny that awaited them.

JOE CARSON glanced back uneasily at the two disheveled, unkempt figures pedaling along wearily behind him. He was returning home from the nearest drugstore, having purchased there all the latest science-fiction magazines he could lay his hands on. The mysterious strangers had appeared suddenly from a side-street, four blocks back, and had clung doggedly to his trail, from that point on. Joe didn't know what they were up to, but he was keeping a wary eye on them.

Harl and Kir-Um had performed a somewhat remarkable feat in driving two stolen bicycles across three hundred odd miles of steaming, strength-sapping, concrete highways and bumpy, bone-dry country lanes, that weren't much more than wagon-ruts through the woods. They had made many false starts and had fallen prey to numerous mishaps, such as punctures and broken spokes. They had subsisted on berries, small game and whatever food they could glean from a farmer's field. Since they had not yet mastered the tongue of these Earth people, they couldn't ask for food at the small road-stands that dotted the way. Nor could they ask directions to their destination. But, by dint of stubborn adherence to their purpose, they had, at last, arrived at the little, prosaic town of Majestic. Covered with dust from head to foot and ready to topple, from sheer exhaustion, they made their way through the streets, feeling a dull conviction of defeat growing within them. For they were unable to read the names of the streets or the numbers of the

houses lined tidily along each side, like proud soldiers. It was night again and the uncompromising gloom only added to their despair. The glaring street-lamps winked gleefully at their plight and cast strange shadows to confuse their tired minds. The plain natives who passed them paid no attention to the Martians. Being of a farming community, they were used to seeing men encrusted with dirt and grime, going home to a hard-earned night's rest.

Harl and Kir-Um were about ready to concede failure, when they had turned from a side-street into the main thoroughfare. There, a thought impinged upon their ever-receptive minds that lent new zest to their sinking spirits. The reflection they received was:

"Boy! You're a lucky stiff, Joe Carson. You'll sure have some good reading tonight!"

Joe Carson! The name struck a vibrant chord in their brains and sent a feeling of elation surging through their bodies. Here was the object of their quest. The person whom they had travelled across scores of miles of terrifying, unfamiliar terrain to find.

Immediately they took up a close orbit in his wake, determined not to lose this brilliant inventor of strange weapons in the darkness of the night.

Joe was at once aware of his shadows, but he thought perhaps they merely happened to be going his way. As block followed block, however, with no let-up of the pursuit, he began to suspicion a dire purpose behind their actions.

Harl and Kir-Um were slowly overtaking the object of their chase, making no attempt to conceal themselves. Squeezing out every last bit of energy, they matched pace with Joe, as he speeded up his pedaling in an effort to pull away.

Joe was beginning to get a little bit scared. What could he have that the strangers would want? Certainly not his bike, for it was worth only a few dollars and had just about seen the end of its years of usefulness. He laughed mentally at the fantastic thought that maybe they were after his science-fiction magazines. Then, what?

They were approaching Joe's house now and his fear mounted steadily. His

parents were gone, away at some social function, and they wouldn't return for three or four hours yet. There was nothing else to do, and so Joe, philosophically deciding to let fate take its course leaped from his bike and made a sudden dash for the shelter of the house.

**I**NSTANTLY they were after him, pounding across the dew-laden sod with all the agility and grace of a couple of rampaging hippopotamuses. Joe bounded through the front door and swung to snap the night-lock. At that moment, something grasped his mind in a firm, unrelenting grip. He no longer had any desire to resist the intruders and stood waiting for them to enter and make him prisoner. Quickly Harl and Kir-Um forced him into a chair and stared down at their victim with triumphant eyes.

"So," Harl panted. "At last we shall learn the secret of Joe Carson, Earth's most amazing genius. Kir-Um, he is but a youth. I shudder at the thought of one so young possessing so much knowledge. Could it be that we have made a mistake?"

Kir-Um looked up at Harl reprovingly. "Do Martians ever err?" he demanded. "No, this boy has a powerful, secret weapon and we must get it from him, at all costs. I can't understand you, Harl. It would seem as if you actually sympathize with these puny Earth people. The Councilor wouldn't like to hear that, Harl. I would hate to see my best friend put to death because he was too friendly with the enemy."

"I'm not friendly with these Earthlings, Kir-Um," Harl hastily objected. "I merely think we should be cautious and not proceed at too fast a pace but what we shall be lured into some sort of death trap."

"Well and good," Kir-Um nodded. "I believe we both realize our task calls for vigilance and a meticulous sifting of fact from fancy. That much goes unsaid. Conceding this genius is merely a boy, perhaps he is a child prodigy or, then again, he may have invented this weapon by accident. That is of little import, however. He has the weapon, we want it and we shall have it."

Harl bowed humbly. "You are right again, Kir-Um. Your deductive powers

constantly amaze me. Shall we begin the questioning?"

Kir-Um wasted no time in preliminaries, but came right to the point.

"Where is your secret weapon, boy?" he snapped. He spoke in his native Martian tongue, but the thought behind the words was quite clear in Joe Carson's receptive mind. Joe fumbled for words and finally answered:

"Weapon? What weapon? The only kind of weapon I've got is my Daisy B-B gun, and that's no secret. Mr. Jones, next door, found out about it yesterday when I shot out his front room window. Boy, was he sore!"

Kir-Um nodded knowingly at Harl and said, in an aside: "He's trying to mislead us. But he won't succeed. The truth will out."

Harl leaned forward to try his hand at the cross-examination. "You know very well what weapon we mean, creature. You have kept your secret well, but now you must relinquish it. Do not try to delude us with fanciful stories and false denials."

"Somebody's been feeding you a line, chum," Joe laughed. "Your trolley's jumped the track. Go on back to your cage, pa, and dream up another one. You bore me."

The Martians realized the youth's mental barrier was going to be more difficult to break through than they had anticipated. The situation called for tact, yet the amount of time left to them necessitated a direct attack. Kir-Um summoned all the powers of concentration at his command and slowly, but surely, forced Joe's mind into a state of passiveness. Satisfied, at last, the Earthling would give direct replies to his questions, Kir-Um once more took over the interrogating duties.

"You cannot deceive us, boy," he began.

"A few days ago, you wrote a letter to Earth's great science center, *Galactic Ventures*, I believe it is. In this letter, you stated you possessed a secret weapon, powerful enough to destroy this whole planet. You did not divulge the details of this invention, but promised dire happenings to anyone unfortunate enough to have this weapon directed upon them. We want the plans of this amazing contrivance and you will do well to place them in our hands, without delay."

"Oh, that," Joe's voice came dull and emotionless. "That's just a joke. Just something I dreamed up to give the ed. a laugh."

Harl and Kir-Um didn't know what a 'laugh' was, but they did know that they were finally making some progress. A meaningful glance passed between them and they silently congratulated themselves for uncovering the genius' secret in such short order.

"And these *Jokes*, creature," Harl spoke, "does anyone beside yourself possess them?"

THE MARTIANS feared perhaps this strange scientist had already distributed his weapon among his fellowmen, in preparation to resist the coming attack, Joe's next revelation immediately justified their fears and shocked them to the point of frustration.

"Sure. All the stf. fans have their little jokes, and they never miss a chance to use them on some dumb ninny. Once I saw the *Misled Biped* pull a joke on a guy and he nearly went into epileptic fits. Of course, it was a low-grade joke, or it would have laid him out cold as a mackerel. You better never meet up with a fan when he's in a joking mood, 'cause they don't have a bit of mercy and he'd probably play you till you busted wide open."

The giggling intruders had visions of their marvelous bodies, bloated till they were but horrible travesties of themselves, then to burst apart like rotten bladders. Their eyes tried to pierce the forbidding blackness of the suddenly-alive corners of the room and sandpaper tongues darted nervously across dry lips. This bland-faced boy seated in front of them was suddenly a repulsive gargoyle, squatting in his evil throne and reveling in his fiendish power.

Harl coughed and made a feeble effort to compose himself. He had been right—this was too big for them to cope with. They may as well return to Mars and forget their dream of conquest. The Grand Councilor was a fool for ever sending them on such a foolhardy expedition and he and Kir-Um were still bigger fools for accepting the task. Yet, how could they have known they would have to face a smoothly-gearred organization consisting of bloodthirsty monsters and power-mad

geniuses who dreamed up fantastic weapons just as an idle pastime? It was a plain case of underestimation of the foe, a miserable, stupid failure.

"Don't give up so easily, Harl," Kir-Um had intercepted Harl's unguarded thoughts and, realizing utter despair was rapidly pulling them down to the point of bolting for the door and making a frantic exit from this mad world, grimly purchased a new hold on his waning optimism.

"Don't forget," he added, carefully shielding his thoughts from the ugly Earth-creature, "once this force is in our hands, we will be as powerful as they. More so, in fact, by virtue of our superior intelligence and our ability to improve the *Jokes* and make of them weapons far surpassing the crude originals in performance. The mere mention of a *Joke* seems to cause a strange emotion in this youth; an odd, violent vibrating of the entire body, accompanied by spasmodic grunts and squeaks. Probably it is his passionate reaction to the thought of the magnitude of his terrible deed. It is like nothing a Martian has ever known. But it is proof this Earthling regards his own creation with apprehensive fear and is reverently aware of its immense potentialities. We must also realize only a portion of the population of this world has *Jokes* at their command, which will make our invasion easier and our victory far more certain. True, many of us will die, but, in the end, we will have Earth and all its wondrous resources for our very own. Would you place your own personal valuation above the continuation of our species, Harl? Do you respect the wishes of the Councilor—Dibble-Ibble, bless him—or do you love your own precious fur in preference to honor and glory? Reflect a moment, Harl, and I know you'll see the wrongness of your decision."

Harl's chin was already halfway down to his feet and his shamed blushing indicated he had reconsidered and repented. He still had his doubts, but they had been squelched to a bare fraction of their former greatness by Kir-Um's defaming tirade.

Kir-Um reminded Harl of their determination by pinching his nostrils together and, assured of Harl's co-operation, resumed the questioning of the youth.

"Do you have a *Joke* with you now, creature?" he asked curiously.

"You bet," Joe replied. "I'm lousy with 'em. Wanta hear one? I got one that'll simply kill you."

The Martians recoiled in terror.

"No," Kir-Um said sternly. "We do not wish to have the *Joke* demonstrated on us. The first suspicious move you make, Earthling, and you are dead. You may exhibit the *Joke* and operate it, if you wish, but do not direct it at us, for your life."

"Okay," Joe agreed amiably. "I'll just give you sort of a sample. Here goes: Why did the moron plant dynamite in the dairy? He wanted to see a boom in the ice cream industry!"

Joe bent double, clasping his hands to his stomach and emitting loud "Haws" and raucous "Hee hees." His head bobbed back and forth like an apple in a tub and his feet played a staccato rhythm on the carpeted floor.

HARL and Kir-Um looked on in confused wonder. They could see no reason for the boy's sudden outburst. They looked in vain for the weapon Joe had promised to display. Then the light dawned in Kir-Um's mind and he let go with a tremendous: "E-e-e-ump!"

"Harl!" he said excitedly. "Don't you see—it's the words! The words are the weapon; his *Joke*, as he calls it. Imagine it—words built into a complex pattern to form a destructive force! It is in an embryo stage though, Harl. This creature barely averted disaster just now when his *Joke* back-fired on him. The pain must be excruciating, the way he is retching and gasping for breath. We may consider ourselves lucky he didn't aim the weapon at us. I shudder at the thought."

Harl was shuddering, too. They were indeed fortunate they were not the object of the force Joe had unleashed, or they would probably now be nothing but lifeless hulks, rotting on the weird world that had betrayed them. He could not understand how words could cause such havoc, but undoubtedly they could, for wasn't the pitiful Thing before them even now contorted with the paralyzing torture he had accidentally inflicted upon himself? Harl knew he could never forget the gruesome drama he was now witnessing. Why, even the creature they had encountered at the citadel of science must have been a

victim of a Joke, for he had acted in the same strange manner.

"That's the only possible explanation, Harl," Kir-Um was speaking again. "This Earthling has discovered a way to assemble words in such a formation as to cause a violent agitation in whatever they are directed upon. I suspect, Harl, if this genius had received the full force of that *Joke*, it would have shaken him apart, utterly and completely. In other words, it would have decomposed his atoms and spread them from here to Dibble-Ibble knows where. Now, we must learn how to form these word patterns, thus to use them against our foe in the coming invasion. Creature, have you a treatise on *Jokes*?"

Joe ceased his giggling and thought a moment. Yes, he did have a treatise on jokes and they would find it in his desk upstairs. Be sure and not touch his perpetual-motion machine, though, for it was delicately balanced.

Kir-Um immediately dispatched Harl to procure the valuable document and waited impatiently till his companion returned. He accepted the book reverently and placed it safely in an inside pocket.

"Good," he muttered. "Now, creature, you will forget all that took place here."

Joe nodded dully. "I understand. You guys are strictly from dreams. I won't remember a thing about you when I come out of my coma."

THE MARTIANS walked to the door and turned to stare triumphantly at their strange companion of the evening. There was a slight twinge of pity in Harl's heart, as he thought of this boy as nothing but a bunch of jumbled atoms flying helter-skelter through the universe, all because he had made a *Joke*.

"You will awaken an hour after we leave," Kir-Um directed.

"Sixty minutes to the dot," Joe affirmed.

Harl and Kir-Um stepped through the door and breathed deeply of the night air. It all seemed like a nightmare now, but the significant bulge in Kir-Um's coat pocket confirmed their brief interlude with the amazing genius, Joe Carson.

Kir-Um withdrew the book and painfully deciphered the title, by the light streaming from a window. It read: *Joe*

*Miller's Joke Book*. The printer must have made a mistake, he reflected. It should read: *Joe Carson's Joke Book*. But no matter.


In the Martians' minds, a picture formed. It was a beautiful picture. Hundreds of sleek, fast spaceships hurtled down on Earth, forming almost a solid sky of steel above the hapless planet. They were strange spaceships, for apparently they carried no armament. The metal that would have been used to equip the ships with guns had, instead, gone into the building of more dreadnaughts of space, for they possessed a weapon far more destructive than any bolt from a ray-gun or blast of a disintegrator-cannon. On the bridge of each ship stood a renowned Martian scientist, a small book clutched tightly in his hand. And on the flagship, the Grand Councilor himself occupied the place of honor, the original copy of the weapon open on a stand before him. As the huge armada entered Earth's atmosphere, gigantic amplifiers blared forth messages of doom to the inhabitants. Words with horrible meaning assailed the ears of the population: 'Why doesn't a chicken cross the road? It doesn't want on the other side!' 'Who was that wife I seen you with last night? That was no wife, that was a lady!' Human creatures screamed in agony and fell in the streets. Ghastly moans of 'Ha haw oh hee!' escaped from clenched teeth and bodies retched with the unbearable pain of their torture. Slowly their bodies decomposed, losing a couple of billion atoms with each convulsion. Soon, not a human remained on Earth and this beautiful world and all its riches passed into the hands of the proven superior species—the Martians. Ah! It was a lovely dream. But soon it would be more than a dream—it would be happy reality. Harl and Kir-Um both sighed together.

They pressed buttons concealed under their coats and slowly began to fade, their outlines becoming indistinct and hazy. Kir-Um raised a hand to his head in salute.

"Poor, foolish Earthlings," he murmured, "this is the end. Always remember, if it had not been for Joe Carson's *Joke*, you would never have found your demise. I salute you, strange creatures."

And they were gone.





# THE VIZIGRAPH

Spring PLANET STORIES, and cold Winter winds whistling about the building eaves. Sorta makes a fellow think in a philosophical vein. We plan ahead, which is the only way, and yet we do not know what the future holds, which is also right. How's your future laid out? Still buying the bonds your country needs? Don't let the headlines of our victories bedazzle you into complacency; no war is over until the men are home, and guns are stacked.

Be that as it may, from the philosophical side, how is the lighter side of your life? Some of you Vizifans have written us in the past weeks, griping, praising, wheedling, and demanding. We've read all the letters, and brought the best of them to you this issue. It's kinda fun doing it, for we get a sort of cross-section view of what your reactions are to the yarns we publish. Trouble is—too many of you let the other fellow write.

And, girls, why aren't you better represented? This is your book, too, why let the men run it to suit themselves? Write those letters, and give us the feminine viewpoint.

Letters must be double-spaced (for editing), and not longer than two pages. Typewritten letters have precedence, but pen or pencil are not barred if the writing is legible enough for the typesetter to read.

If these Vizifans will drop a card indicating their choices, I'll send their originals for the best letters of the Winter crop. The originals naturally come from the Fall Ish.

1. Joe Kennedy. 2. Doris A. Currier. 3. Stanley Skirvin.

And that about winds up this issue. We've new yarns on tap, and big plans for PLANET STORIES. Get in your letters, and help us build a better book. Until then, take a look at—

## A KNIGHT UNGIRDLED!

306 West 11th St.,  
New York 14, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm laughing, my friend. Not at you, nor again at PLANET STORIES, but at one yclept Damon the Demon, who has a letter in the Vizigraph. Now I don't expect you to recall one letter out of the junk heap, so I'll elucidate: it seems that this Damon has a friend by the name of Fleming, who sold you a story. Damon has been watching PLANET, looking for aforementioned opus, and in the course picked up the Summer Issue, read it, and shipped you a letter of critique thereon.

And what sayeth our Knight? Well, in reference to a certain tale called "Warriors of Two Worlds," by a certain Wellman, he pens: "If anything I've read ever justifies the name of 'hack,' this is it. Reading the thing, I could almost feel Wellman's mighty mechanical brain whirring effortlessly along . . . the style is smooth, like a thick coating of gelatine over the rough, ugly shape of plot and background." And so on.

I'm laughing, pard, because I've just read that story by Stuart Fleming in the new issue. And the paragraph quoted above is as

good a criticism of "Doorway to Kal-Jmar" as anyone could write.

I'll give Fleming credit for exactly one sentence of excellent description: "There was a sense of decay about it, he thought, but it was the decay of supreme beauty, caught at the very verge of dissolution and preserved for all eternity." I don't know if this Wellman story has so much as a memorable sentence in it; perhaps, and then again perhaps not. But one sentence was all that "Kal-Jmar" had to offer, outside of an ironic ending which was good in that it was the ending to a dull, lifeless, and uninspired bit of tripe. The idea of the Martians passing on a completely phony language to Earthmen because Earthmen had nothing to offer them is interesting, but in this drivelish trapping is a single flash of wasted brilliance.

All in all, by the evidence of this story, Damon's friend Fleming is a total loss; suggest you use letters of criticism by yon Knight instead. They make for mirthsome reading at least.

Yours,

EVERETT C. MARSHALL.

## TWICE A YEAR HUNTER!

June 10, 1944

DEAR PEACOCK:

It's been over six months since I have been able to write an honest-to-goodness fan letter on an honest-to-goodness typewriter, so this is something of an unusual occasion for me. The Fall Issue is the subject of our discussion today, students, so we take up first—the cover.

Parkhurst has done some nice interiors for other magazines, but this painting barely comes to "average." Our Hero in the foreground resembled something St. John might have done on a bad day, but otherwise the whole picture is mediocre and, like all your covers, stereotyped. Since PLANET's inception, it has had few, if any, really outstanding covers. Everybody and his Uncle Dudley have griped about them, to no avail. It seems that you intend to continue with these puerile specimens of scientific art, so I shall say nothing more about them, except that I hope you will soon change over to more popular artists and better portrayals of scenes from your stories. (That's us—unshakable in our ignorance. Ed.)

As far as the interior art goes, it is poor. Doolin, unpopular as he is, is the best this time, and Ingels, by the skin of his teeth, manages to make a par rating. Elias and this fellow Kiemle were, frankly, terrible. Alas, can this be the PLANET of old?

All but one story this issue were unimportant. Kuttner alone was outstanding, and even he can do much better. *The Eyes of Thar* was good, quite typical of the author.

You can rate Wylie, Simak, Jacobi, Conover, and Selwyn in any order you please. All were average, well told, blood and thunder tales. It does my heart good to see a yarn by a fan who seems to be up and coming, even though *The Soul Eaters* was nothing exceptional. Someday the names of many of today's fans will be familiar in the contents pages of the mags, instead of the letter columns. Me? Oh, I'm ambitious too.

The only yarn not up to snuff was Farrell's. Entertaining, perhaps, but certainly not my idea of good science-fiction.

Sincerely,

GENE HUNTER,  
S 2/c, U.S.N.R.

## YOURS FROTHILY!

Freeport, Ill.  
R. R. 3

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, here I am again. You asked for me. (Ye Ed. nastily, I did, did I!) Yes, you did. You wanted more froth in the Vizigraph. And who is frothier than I? That isn't what my friends say about me, (the rats) but we'll pass over that. So on to more pressing subjects.

A thousand thanks for the originals. And thanks to everyone that made it possible for me to win one. They occupy a place of honor in my inner sanctum. I shall hand them down to my grandchildren.

What I really crave to know tho is this. WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE OFF-TRAIL NOVEL? Imagine me, dear Editor, with tears in my big starry eyes, a sob in my throaty voice, on bended knee, pleading, "Bring back, oh bring back the off-trail novel. They carried me back to my innocent childhood. Back to the days when both science-fiction and I were young and innocent. As I vaguely remember those days, there was a lot more fiction than science in the science-fiction stories back then. But we read 'em and liked 'em. Also, defiantly defying all purists of the science-fiction realm, I claim that a touch of fantasy is exciting, spicy, and enjoyable. Now let the Q rays play about my defenseless head.

This brings us to the art dept. So your Vizifanners do not like undraped females? Heh, heh, heh, she laughed wickedly. Are you men or robots? What I dislike is striking one gosh-awful cover out of every three. The type of cover that you have to buy a newspaper to cover it up with until you get home. The exterior on the Winter issue is a good example. The heroine was completely out of proportion to the monster holding her. And the hero looked as tho he had been drained of fifty percent of his IQ. Doolin's pic for *Colony of the Unfit*—Well, words fail me. At my first look I tho my eyes were failing me. I opened them carefully and took a second look. It was still terrible. Mr. Doolin, get a book on anatomy and study it. You are illustrating for PLANET STORIES; not Snappy Tidbits. After so many good illustrations why turn out a horrible piece of work like that.

Now for the winter line-up. Mr. DePina, my little cabbage, I salute you on both cheeks. You are superb, wonderful. While I do not believe that your *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep* was quite as good as *Minions*, it was still a fine story. I would rate it high if only for one exquisite sentence. "The mind that had tiptoed the shores of his consciousness with sandals of foam." That, sir, is writing. There wasn't a bad story in the whole issue. *Chimera World* was excellent. I like a story where the explanation doesn't come until the end. A hangover from my "whodunit" days. Bradbury's story was his best to date. But I am running out of room. Will merely repeat that all the stories were up to par.

There are so many fine letters this time that it's hard to choose. But here goes. E. Z. Karpin—V. R. Heiner—Doris A. Currier.

And so, little children of the Vizigraph, I bid you one and all a hearty farewell. As ever, I remain,

Yours frothily,

VIRGINIA L. SHAWL.

EVILMAN!!!

1311 25th Street,  
Galveston, Texas.

DEAR EDITOR:

So you haven't had a good laugh in weeks, eh? (Sneer.) I, as the Commando whispered while slushing through the sewers of Paris, smell a rat. Tell me, Ed—do you *look* at those covers, or just clap 'em on quick to spare the eyes? Or didn't you honestly think Parkhurst's current effort was amusing?

While on the subject, we may as well dissect the cover and clear the decks of the good ship *S. S. Libel* for action. Coming as a complete surprise to nobody, the Titanic Triangle is back again—Evilman, (he's got a pal this time, I see) Geraldine, and Horatio, the Ovaltine ad. Sudden thought—mebbe this Trio will hold office even longer than Roosevelt! Aside from the plot, the cover doesn't repel one too much despite the greens and yellows and a general pallor reminding of a T. B. ward. As a matter of fact, the girl might even be termed exciting. I mean the cover. Of course. Heh!

On to fiction. First place goes to Manfred A. Carter. *Colony of the Unfit* was well-worked-out, well-written, and just plain good stuff all around. Mebbe Mr. Carter will write some more, perhaps?

Next, *Lazarus Come Forth*. Bradbury had graduated from the up-and-coming school; he's arrived.

Following very close behind, like the Wolf Man in pursuit of the current heroine, comes a three-way tie between Farrell, Peacock, and MacReigh, all uniformly good.

Fourth place goes to Wells' *The Hairy Ones*. Good old-time stf.

Fleming grabs off the fifth-place spot with *Doorway to Kal-Jmar*. This didn't impress me one way or the other—some of it I liked, some not. Mediocre.

Sixth—*Invader from Infinity* by George Whittington. There was too much of this-is-it-men, McPartland and McTavish, spatial units, Mister So-and-so, and general corniness. Still, it had its points. (Stole a ration book, no doubt.)

The coveted last-place position I herewith cheerfully bestow on the Brain of PS, Al De Pina, with the following astute observation: I have read Merritt's *Moon Pool* about six times, and still enjoy it, but this story Mr. DePina keeps writing under two-dollar titles is wearing plenty thin. In short, *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep* was just that; it kept me in a deathless sleep; a sort of coma, you might say, from which I was roused by *Chimera World*. Don't misunderstand me—it was a good story in itself, but it just reeked of *sameness*, whatever that is.

The artwork (aha—a touch of ribald humor!) was, shall we say, not good. Or shall we say . . . no, better not, I guess. Potter, especially in his pic for the Bradbury tale, shows promise, however.

First place in La Vizi goes to Bill Stoy; would that all the letters were like that! Or all of the stories, for that matter. Next Joe Kennedy. Hah! Lastly, Damon Knight, the Cynical Soul.

And now I leave you (g'wan and cheer; I ain't sensitive!) with this one final, brooding, dark thought. Tell me—does your cigarette taste different lately?

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER.

*Sage of the Sagebrush.*

REFORMED FAN!

Eastaboga, Alabama

DEAR SCOTT:

H'r'y, hray, hray! First Bill Conover comes through with what will go down in PLANET history as the Great Off-Trail Suggestion; and now he comes through with a fine novelet!! Hray fer Conover, the Nothing-As-Yet!

"*The Soul Eaters*" is a swell story. Somewhat melodramatic, I think, but . . . Truly, PLANET is the magazine of the new writer . . . and that's no slur!

However, the best yarn in the ish is Kuttner's "*Eyes of Thar*." Ah, Henry! Old Faithful Kuttner. . . . Keep Kuttner Koming. . . .

Dirk Wylie furnished a very neat novelette. . . .

Carl Selwyn's "*Citadel of Death*" was a pretty good Stfantasy. Yup, yup, yup! Two gals after him, hah? The poor guy . . . the *poor* guy . . . like Hell!

Joe Farrell has not yet climbed back up to the level of his first yarn.

Simak and Mr. Meek are both welcome back. Of course, this is the merest hack . . . of course, these tales have no literary value . . . of course, they will never be classics . . . *what do I care?* I like 'em!

And now . . . a kick. I didn't care for Jacobi's *Doctor Universe*. I hate quiz programs, and yarns about 'em!

The artwork will now come beneath my wise and experienced eye, to be given consideration by my superior wisdom.

Seriously . . . the first PLANET I ever saw was the Fall, '43 ish. It had a cover on it that is one of the best I have ever seen. . . . Rozen's, of course . . . next issue, the Winter one, had a Gross, a step down from Rozen, but still pretty good. Especially the dame. Then came Ingels, and I frowned a trifle. But annudder sweet damsel . . . dams . . . damse . . . tomato.

Then Gross returned again, with a luscious brunet beauty . . . and the awfullest monster I have ever seen in the way of a BEM.

And now, Parkhurst, and a step down from the Summer cover. Please, what yarn did it illustrate? And boiled lobster, yet. . . .

Doolin delighted and surprised me with his pic for Kuttner's yarn. Can he do that every time? Swell work, D. More, if you keep it up.

Ingel's inside pix also improved. Hot dorg.

Look . . . I think that ye ed runs the best letter section in the business . . . and he is certainly my favorite editor. SO, why should any of youse kik?

Has anyone got the Fall, '43 ish, and any previous to that, in good condition 'n with covers, for sale? If so, *please* write me, giving date, condition of the mags and covers, and price. . . .

If any fan in Alabama who I haven't gotten in touch with will write either to me or Julian Williamson, 501 North Court Street, Talladega, Alabama, it will be appreciated. Alafans, our state is the worst (or least), represented state in fandom. Well, whatta we gonna do about it? ALAFANS, ALAFANS, ALAFANS, *AWAKE!!!*

And now, before closing up . . . a sincere touch. I am sincerely pleased to have sold a yarn to PLANET. I'm glad to make my first sale to my fave SF mag. And there'll be more coming . . . have a novelette on ze fire now . . . and I hope the vizifans react favorably. I'll never pan a writer again. . . .

Yours,

TOM PACE.

## QUOTE-UNQUOTE

2258 Nicholas St.,  
Fresno 2, Calif.

## DEAR EDITOR PEACOCK:

While I'll probably talk of the Micro-this and Macro-that, time out while I thank you for the two Ingels and one Doolin artist's originals. Especially for the extras with your compliments! They're framed and hung, already.

Will have to brief the Fall issue—though belatedly—as well as that of Winter, '44. Glad to see Vizifan W. C. become Author Conover in the fine feature story, *The Soul Eaters* . . . Did I "dood it"?

I'm glad P.S. has not gone "military," like a certain one-time competitor—stories, reader letters and illustrations all by military personnel. Also, I'm delighted that P.S. shows no sign of picking authors because they have small (pin?) heads and very large feet (micrencephalia and macropodia), as the editor of the militarized competitor avows that he does. [That a "Rap," eh?] (Right, Ed.)

One criticism: Neither issue has a Brackett tale. I've seen our Leigh's picture, so know she is not afflicted with micrencephalia or macropodia—besides she's not a WAC—hence can not have been "Kidnapped" by this alleged, militarized competitor. Her last P.S. tale *Terror out of Space* was fine; but her *Jewel of Bas* was an epic.

Sigler's Winter letter called Lesser a "microcephalic idiot," meaning micrencephalic idiot; but I don't believe it. However, if so, Milt should be able to land fiction with that militarized competitor of P.S.—if he'll also join the army, and if he has macropodia. Ah, if!

In Fall issue, enjoyed Jacobi using the new superonic angle in yet a different way; *Mr. Meek* in a chuckling new adventure, and a fair Vizi. Kuttner's *Eyes of Thor* made me wonder if we are merely translated to an invisible co-existent world after earthly death. I second Newstead's plea:—"Let's have more stories like Brackett's *Jewel of Bas*."

Those lines at the top of Guy Trucano's Winter letter almost gave "Opinionated-but-Good" Kinkade macromelus of the chest. Thanks. But you tackled a Rocklynn-Bond subject using Super sound on Fourth Dimension stuff. I think you could "land" in SF magazines better with a Plot-Atmosphere-Gadget tale of inter-world combat—if you reach them with the right wordage when they are in need of a tale. Go to it, Guy—and you other unsung SF-Munchausens, too. Stick in a macrodoot (big toothed) Humanoid—for cover artists' benefit. [De Pina did.]

*The Colony of the Unfit* can not help but be intensely interesting to a Hundred Million of those over the combat age or 4F's. Among them are millions that—in some states—already suffer modified segregation and concurrent heart-break for themselves and loved ones. Breaking up family life—which is the basis of the successful democracy, is practiced by health and welfare authorities now, with judicial sanction—against constitutional rights all too often. And that in this Land of the Free! Perhaps this tale will stop some of this breaking up of families, isolationism, segregation, over-riding of Rights.

Increase in ESP, by drugs, made *Mind Stealers of Pluto* different; *Doorway to Kal-Jmar* is a good ironic justice short; *Invader from Infinity* is simon-pure interplanetary adventure; in

*Chimera World* the announcement that "dead men lived" seizes the attention and interesting continuous-flow narrative holds it; *The Hairy Ones* is plain adventure-short with special local color; *Lazarus Come Forth* starts with zombie-appearance and proves a tale of voluntary (heroic) sacrifice; *Double Cross* is poetic justice with ironic ending. All-around good issue—is that of Winter, '44! . . . *The Keepers of the Deathless Sleep* was reminiscent of *Jewel of Bas*; but—good as it is—one has a sense of being compelled to jump gaps left by the author.

Winter Vizi again:—Hetschel quotes Maunsbach about the fine magazine being spoiled by "trash you put into it"; but Eileen Ruble complains of the Art. Hetschel likes the Bare Chassis; Ruble thinks it needs upholstery with fat (on cover girls). Paging Doolin, Ingels and Anderson!

It reminds me of two SF fans talking of PLANET's covers and pictures. Said No. 1: "I like the girls, because they have lots of personality." Said No. 2: "I like 'em to have nice curves, too." Even macromastia would please many of the fellows. And microscopic clothing!

I put the names of top-notch Viziwriters on slips, in a hat. Shaken well, I drew out my vote for the top three: 1st, Doris Currier; 2d, Guy Trucano; 3d, Joe Kennedy. Hope you get Doolin and Ingels originals, too!

In closing I recommend all to throw over the dimes and grabs a PLANET STORIES each time issued, before they are gone from sale. Read them when a leisure-break comes, too [but you'll do that, anyhow].

Sincerely yours,  
AUGUSTUS ELLIOTT KINKADE,  
The O-but-G.

## ANOTHER SUCKER!

2307 Tenth Street,  
Columbus, Ga.

## DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

On June 5 I bought my first issue of PLANET STORIES. It was the Summer issue and I supposed it had just come on sale. On June 11, I wrote you a letter on that issue. On June 14 I went to the newsstand brooding over how it would be three long months before another P. S. was on sale when to my utter amazement and delight there was the fall issue of PLANET. I hurriedly reached in my pocket. I had only a nickel. I dashed home, secured three more nickels, dashed back to the store, bought the book, dashed back home and began to read.

First I turned to the Vizigraph. You said that typed letters had a better chance than written ones. Also, you said that letters should be sent a few days after any issue went on sale. I figured that by the time my first letter was published (if it was) it would be kind of out of date. So, I'm writing you another, or rather typing you another.

About the stories I will only say that they were all good, for whom I to criticize the works of great authors. I was glad to see Mr. Meek again. He is a good character to have a series about. I would also like to see more of Grannie Annie and Billy Boy. The Feature Flash was super. How about a space scene for the cover.

If there is any way to get back issues of P. S. I wish you would tell me about it. (Send your list—and the dough. Ed.)

Lovingly yours,  
MILLARD GRIMES.

## DON'T BLAME DALLAS

1851 Euclid Ave.,  
Cleveland, Ohio

DEAR ED:

If this letter is nutty, don't blame me, blame the Winter PLANET!! Aaarrgh! 2 stories about Venus, with 2 different types of Venusians! Aaarrgh! 4 stories of Mars, with 4 of the queerest Martians imaginable. Sand-eating Semipentipedes (pardon my whistled 'S's), Chinamen, Aaarrgh! Deplorable, Horrible. Everyone knows we Tigermen, scourge of Buck Rogers, are the real inhabitants of Mars, Aaarrgh! To top it all, we have a story called *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep*. Aaarrgh! Venusians, Mercutians, Martians, Saturnians, Europeans, Aaarrgh, I can't go on! The only characters alike were Earthlings.

Tearfully, my simple mind snapping, I dropped the book, picked up a Disintegrator, and shot myself. I couldn't stand it, I tell you. But, I guess (sob) I must go on (sob). A drink of 'Zooglar' from Phonos, and . . . Aaarrgh! There, now I'm ready! (Don't blame me for all this, I warned you in the first line.)

Was the best story the featured Novel? No! The cover illustration? No! It was *Lasarus Come Forth*, by Bradbury. Gad, what a writer. This is beginning to look like a series, I hope, Dope.

Second was *Double Cross*, by McCreigh. I just love stories with a catchy twist. I didn't guess it myself until the end.

Third was *Chimera World*, by you-know-who. That sure hit the jackpot. I suppose you shall try for a Novel next time? Naturally, with no one to reject your stories. (Are you kidding! Ed.) Which brings us to my specialty. An unthought-of original plot! Tta-raaa.

"Ur"

A giant planet the size of Jupiter comes toward Earth and Mars, and a collision is feared. Ur, the planet, misses, but Earth and Mars become moons of Ur. The Martians (doomed to be villains eternally by authors) attack Ur, and Earth is shocked to learn the dirty Martians plan to use Earth as a meteor to hurl against Ur. Ur intends to blast Earth with a force ray to stop it. This puts Earth in a very tight spot, but tight! Martians come, battle Earth, and maneuver the planet toward Ur. A white beam lashes out, hits Earth. There is a terrific explosion, and Mars blows up. The light was merely a decoy, harmless. The force ray was invisible, and was sent to off-guard Mars. With the help of Ur, Earth finishes off Martians on her soil, and the two planets, Ur and Earth, make peace plans, and everyone, every single decillion people are happy.

Now we come to the Vizigraph. Karden must have worked hard on his. He gets first place. Kennedy gets second. He was right about no one reading the ratings of the stories, but if you add a lot of hooie and junk like I did, you might get away with it. (Hey, I still want an original, Aboriginal! I can dream, anyway, so I'll take a pick, just in case. If there is a whole page drawing for that Vizigraph "L" shaped pic, I'll take it please. Tell the artist it's the best in the book. I wonder why no one comments on it? If not, I'll take Potter's for *Lasarus*. This isn't a hint, now, don't get the wrong idea about me. Heheheh.)

What really got me was that crack you made about Anderson and the Monster. Incidentally, the Super Science club around here nominated Parkhurst for the Flaming Catacombs on Luna. Get Bergery or Belarski, please!

Hay, Willy, do you have a back issue of PLANET with the story "Vassal's of the Master World"? All I ever hear or read in your mag is comment on that classic, that masterpiece, etc., etc. Where, o, where is it? I've gotta see it, or I'll go still crazier, if possible. (Sorry, sold out. Ed.)

In my last letter, I don't know if it's going to be printed, there is a little foot-note under my name saying *The Red Joker*. Aaarrgh! My sister, littler than me, typed it in a fit of cruelty while I was cowering away from her barbed lash. All of you who have little sisters probably know what I've been thru. Don't pay any attention to that blurb, she did it! I still have a seven-inch scar across my side where she extracted my appendix with a machete. And that red whelp down my back where she hit me with a red hot poker, and those gashes on my chest where she stripped my skin with her lagers . . . oooooohhh, she's a nice girl to know. I will never forget the time when she locked the neighbor's baby in the freezer, or the time she pushed my pal's face into a running circular saw. Glug, pardon me, I'm beginning to get sick again (she's just come in with a large pair of tweezers and a pair of tongs, gleaming hot, and she's got that look in her eyes again).

I don't think I'll get that original, but I'd better be wrong. No, here she comes, no . . . no . . . NO . . . Eeaarrggghggleggle . . . \*\*

Witlessly,

G. DALLAS.

## WASTEBASKETITIS

48-Mill Road,  
Durham, N. H.

PEACOCK!!!!

Directly following is a letter. Please print same.

For many moons, I have been writing letters to editors, and for corresponding many moons, said editors have been dropping said letters quietly into wastebaskets. This must cease!!!! This "egotistical fool" feels that his epistles are as high quality as the average "smugly concealed moron."

Enough.

I am now gonna tell you what I thought of the Winter Issue (Just as if anybody cared).

Cover: As much as it pains me to say this, it was GOOD, and that's saying something for Parkhurst. The supposedly humanoid girl looked more human than his last month's human one.

I'll group the rest of the stories together. All good except *The Hairy Ones*. I lost track of what was going on and why in the middle and still haven't got it completely figured out. *Chimera World* was especially good.

Vizigraph: First honors go to Ray Karden, with Damon Knight a close second and to Edwin Sigler, a great big juicy razberry. Nobody's MAKING him read the letters. Oh well, in 136, 000,000½ people there are bound to be a few like that.

All in all, this ish is the best I've seen in a long time and raises P. S. to No. 2 on my hit parade. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,  
ALBERT YEAGER JR.  
*The Persistent One*



## NUTS TO DEPINA!

215 West 90th St.  
New York, 24, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I wonder if Albert DePina has a little card labeled "fight scenes." In all of his recent stories the "superbly muscled" hero's right arm is a peg on which he hangs the blows of someone or other, and his heels forever touch the floor and refuse to give way, come hell or a Calamar. Too much is too much! His pet word seems to be "supernal." Ah nuts!

So, you sneaked another one in there Mr. Peacock. Not bad but the title is a laugh. (Thank Heaven—*somebody* can laugh! Ed.)

**MIND STEALERS OF PLUTO**, ran away with first place. A nice piece of writing, Mr. Farrell. Doolin's pic was only fair—no action.

By the way, what does the cover illustrate? Once again the semi-nude female is bored with it all. Dear Mr. Editor, don't you take the readers' suggestions when it comes to the cover. Apparently you do not. Those harem beauties are fine but NOT on an STF mag. I entirely agree with Stanley Skirvin. Go easy with the pulchritude.

It amazes me the way Vizigraphounds can so lightly skip over Rubimor's superb illustration. (Which one is this? Ed.)

Bradbury seems stuck in the morbid rut of the Morgue Ship. And the same kind of finish as the other one. So Lazarus is safe, So Brandon is meat for Martian molars, so the Morgue Ship wends its merry way through gore galore, so lay off the morgue ship theme.

I hope my opening paragraph isn't as inane as Joe Kennedy's. Usually he writes a damn (whoops) good letter.

Hmmm! A few originals to the most clever huh. Well, well! WELL!

Most sincerely,  
RICHARD ROSEN.

## RUGGED CHARACTER?

Buffalo, New York  
166 Beard Avenue

DEAR ED.:

Here I sit in my 4' by 4' cell, gazing at that *vulgar!!!!* cover on the Winter Issue of PLANET. My eyes take on a wolfish glazed look, my tongue hangs out of my mouth, I drool a slimy ichor which drips down onto the typewriter keys, the loorid! cover swims before my eyes. Hey! That dame ain't even got a bathing suit on under that cellophane thing! Pretty soon you'll have to call it *Spicy Planet Stories!* But never mind Wilbur, secretly I love the stuff!

"*The Mind Stealers of Pluto*" is plain everyday hack, but good reading just the same. The characters are just plain everyday sf characters, muscular heroes, beautiful dames, villains in disguise.

Who is this guy Anderson? He stinks. Or at least his pictures do. "*Doorway to Kal-Jamar*" has reached such a stage of putrefaction that I decline to mention anything about it. No more of that, please!

"*Invader from Infinity*" was about the second best story in the magazine. It had plausibility, good characterization, and a-a-aaPLOT! And what's more no women (Ahhhhhhh.)

"*Keeper of the Deathless Sleep*" was all right. Not enough deathless sleep in it, however. The story should have been hinged about that and not

the Cinnabarians. I don't like those little things DePina sticks in front of the story. Too hard to understand.

Well Wilbur, you did all right on "*Chimera World*." Novel plot at least. What's that phrase "deceptively wide shoulders" at the end of the 4th paragraph, pg. 62. For once is the hero being run down or something? Oh well, lets have more like it.

"*The Hairy Ones*" stinks. How could any hero in his right mind go for a dame that was covered with fur? I'd skin 'er and make a rug for my den. (Some rug that would be, according to the picture.) I'm just a vicious character, I guess. Next.

"*Colony of the Unfit*" was the best of the bunch. Sort of a tinge of isolationism, wasn't there. I mean that sort of sarcastic last paragraph. A swell story.

I'd rate "*Lazarus Come Forth*" about 3rd, I guess. Should of dragged the son Richard in and revived him, too!

Whats this? "*Double Cross*?" I read ahead and ruined it though. Should have told more about the appearance of the Venusians.

La Vizi is hotsy tots as usual. You're right though, Wilbur, the letters aren't as good as they used to be. Hope for improvement though. I'll be seeing you (in all the old familiar places).

Yours truly,  
BOB LAMBERT.  
*The Beelzebub.*

## SUPER-WESTERNS?

Lidgerwood, N. D.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am writing this mainly on the subject of the Vizigraph, so I will first cover the rest of the mag hastily.

The Mr. Meek series is good—keep it up. "*Men Without a World*" was very good, but the Centaurs remind me too much of the Japs. They talked just like the Japs talk in stories whose authors know nothing about Japs. The rest of the stories were good but not exceptional.

Get a cover picture to fit a story! If your artists can't draw a picture to fit a story, have an author write a story around a painting. One other magazine is using this system now and then.

Now the Vizi. I agree fully with Mr. Herbert regarding the type of story which should be included in PLANET. I know that the majority of readers prefer Super-Westerns, but couldn't we conservatives have at least one *science* story per issue? Of course, we're all interested in people. So how about a psychological yarn?

You should try to keep a good feud going in the Vizi. It adds interest to what is sometimes mere drivel. But the topics under controversy should be more sensible than the present one. Buchanan and Lesser can both apply what they say about each other to themselves.

If Buchanan and Lesser argue any longer, each one will only convince himself of the truth of his own opinion. More tolerance, please.

I see that I haven't time to write any more, because I have a little matter to attend to. I had an omelette for dinner; in my opinion, it didn't taste just right. But since I have never laid an egg, I must go now to the chicken coop to solicit the criticism of the hens who are more qualified to judge.

Sincerely,  
ROY PAETZKE.



## AND THANK YOU!

Bakersfield, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

You finally did it, and good for you. I mean by that man Fred A. Carter's *Colony of the Unfit*. I liked it the best of the Winter Issue, possibly because I am like Hilda the Heroine in that I also have but one arm. I lost my right arm near the shoulder when I was in High School. I finished school single-handedly, you might say, and for the past four years have been running a switchboard in a local factory.

Come on now Ed. and give us handicapped readers a break like that more often. I know there are others like I who feel the same way, we like to read of ourselves and how we overcame our handicaps.

I have read your mag. for several years and I think it is the best mag. of its kind that is printed but this is the first time I have expressed my appreciation. I think all of the stories were swell but as I said before, *Colony of the Unfit* tops them all. Thank you.

MISS BETTY LANCASTER.

## PLANS!

Guernsey, Iowa.

DEAR EDITOR:

Do you ever print letters from Iowa fans in the Viz? Don't believe I ever saw any. Your mag and our state are famous for the same thing;—Corn!!!! Is that the answer, or do you just naturally hate us Iowans? Wantum answer. (Like Iowa. Gottum answer. Ed.)

Would like to hear Joe Kennedy's new theory of electronics. The one he was going to explain to Ray Karden. Swap him a copy of my theory of Relative Relativity for it. Dr. Einstein says all things are relative. Therefore, I say Relativity is relative. Hence my theory of Relative Relativity. Catch on?????

Wilbur, ol' pal, ol' pal, you done did me a great favor long time ago. I shall remember it; when the boys with the white coats and the butterfly nets finally catch you, (they will, you know), I shall remember that you are my old pal. I shall use all of my influence to secure for you the finest accommodations available in whatever Booby Hatch you may be incarcerated. Yes, and maybe even a Nylon straitjacket. Nothing but the best for a pal of mine. Isn't that nice? The favor? As yes. Remember way back '42-43? You published *Thought Men of Mercury*? Same ish *War Gods of the Void*, cover by Leydenfrost. Good Mag them days.

Them jerks read thoughts. Give me huge idea. Them do, why not me? Me study thought reading. Take long time to become good at it. No longer needed to study electricity, astrophysics, cosmic rays, etc. I simply read the thoughts of college professors. Anybody want to take a correspondence course in thought reading? Tuition very reasonable. Only nine pounds of radium, or two satellites.

My system really works. For instance, I tried it out. Wanted radio license. No want to study Ohm's law, Lente's law, modulation, vacuum tubes, etc. Me would use thought reading. Went to FCC office. In July. Got question sheets. Staggered to table under their weight. Laid them on table. Table broke down. Sat on floor amid papers. Tried to read Radio Inspector's thoughts. Oops!!! No go. R. I.'s have no thoughts. No mind. Looks bad. Then me notices fellow next corner. Him been through kindergarten. Him

smart jerk. Readum his thoughts. Get answers. Write down answers. Give in papers. Mr. Fly thinks it is Xmas season. Sends license. Fone foist. Xmas present. How nice. Now up without station. Anybody know station without op? You see my method really works wonderfully. Interested?

Now working on plans for spaceship. Can't get materials. Priorities. WPB no think space travel essential. No matter. Build after priorities end. Need experienced crew. Where to find experienced crew for spaceship? First ship ever built. Experienced crew, where to find. Ah yes!! Now I have the answer. I'll get a crew of STF mag editors. Not enough? Then I'll have to include STF writers. Show them how goofy their stories are. Still not enough? Well, now maybe I'll have to include a few STF fans. Any volunteers?? How about you, Joe?

Wilbur, ol' pal, ol' pal, I want you for Third Officer on this ship. In charge of planetary flora and fauna. Also Chief of Metallurgy Department. Do you accept, ol' pal, ol' pal? Mine will be a palatial spatial craft, equipped for anything. Maybe gone long time. Howsaboutit? First stop Mars. Next, Saturn. Wonder who owns the planets? First guy who gets there? Need passports? Oh well.

PS—Wanna buy some stock in Sherlock's Super Spaceships, Inc??

LEWIS SHERLOCK,

Pres., Mgr., and Chief Engineer,  
Sherlock's Super Spaceships, Inc.

## FIRST ATTEMPT!

Box 70,  
Micaville, N. Car.

DEAR EDITOR:

Although I have been reading PLANET STORIES every issue since Volume I, No. 3, this is my first attempt at writing a letter to any S. F. or Fantasy mag.

First off on my criticisms is the cover. The covers have too many bright and lurid colors (this, I suppose, is to catch the eye so a beginner will notice the cover and buy the mag). And another thing, whatever happened to the small planets on the cover? They helped the looks of the cover considerably.

Please get back some of the old authors such as "Binder," "Cummings," "Bracket," "Bond," and "Rocklyne," also it would improve the pics to get "Leydenfrost" to do some covers and inside illustrations.

Now to get down to the business of stories and articles, "hm." I'll use my own method which starts at 100% (not that you ever had any stories that rated that much).

The stories are rated as follows:

<i>The Citadel of Death</i> .....	92%
<i>The Eyes of Thar</i> .....	84%
<i>Mr. Meek Plays Polo</i> .....	80%
<i>The Soul Eaters</i> .....	70%
<i>Men Without a World</i> .....	59%
<i>Highwayman of the Void</i> .....	35%
<i>Doctor Universe</i> .....	7%

The best part of P. S. is the Vizigraph, so please keep up the good work.

I may gripe a lot but honestly your mag is unconditionally the best mag all the way around in the entire Science Fiction and Fantasy field.

Sincerely,

JAY E. WYATT.

## KIBITZER!

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

I have never written a fan letter to any magazine before, nor will I be apt to do so again. My sole reason for writing this one is to rush to the support of one E. F. Buchanan (spelled in capitals despite Mr. Milt Lesser's, the now not-so-happy genius, efforts to the contrary).

My sentiments are exactly parallel to those of the worthy Mr. Buchanan (E. F. please note). Most S. F. fans, after reading 3 or 4 mags, consider themselves experts upon what is "hack," "trash," "tripe" or what is "superb," "gigantic" or "super." They denounce hard-working writers in the most expressive of phrases, for stories that they themselves could not even hope to produce.

Honest criticism is a wonderful stimulant for any worker, regardless of his occupation, but long-winded, character-degrading, muck-raking letters about some author they have never seen are merely the braggart's way of drawing attention to his own "talent" for judging stories. I sometimes think an author's name should not be listed after his story. After all, what do readers read the stories for; the enjoyment they get, or to verbally spit in the author's eye?

I have read many S. F. mags over a number of years, and willingly say one thing: Planet Stories' Vizigraph is the best discussion corner of its kind. I will also say that there are other magazines that excel PLANET in a number of ways. I would like to see PLANET STORIES get ahead, as the attitude of the editors is very fine, but to allow such eloquent slanderers as our "happy genius" (in letters of the lower case) to take valuable space in an otherwise improving mag is definitely not to the better interests of the publishers.

My congratulations, Mr. Buchanan, on your clear-cut interpretation of the small-brained, big-headed readers of this publication. Consider me your most ardent sympathizer and devoted admirer.

F. J. BETHEL,  
"the disgusted bystander"

## SO-CALLED COVER?

1303 Mystery Street,  
New Orleans 19, La.

DEAR EDITOR:

Having finished the Winter '44 P. S., I shall risk my life by commenting on same.

The so-called cover: The beautiful red-headed heroine, wearing lavender cheesecloth for a dress, is being held over the parapet by a green-skinned, ape-faced villain. Nearby is the handsome(?) hero choking a second villain, and at the same time pointing a gun at the first villain. In the background is a tiny rocket ship diving and blasting the city with a ray of some kind. What a mess! The only good thing is the gal, and she doesn't seem to even care if the villain drops her or not. Even Gross can do better than that.

The pictures on the inside were no better.

Hey! Where in h— is Gifford's cartoon? PLANET isn't the same without it. (Take a look, Bud, Ed.)

La Vizi: 1) Joe Kennedy. 2) Ray A. Karden. 3) Dick Hetschel. Stanley Skirvin has something in his opinions on cover pictures. Although you can't judge a book by its cover, many people, especially those who consider scientfiction beneath the intelligence of the average person, are

Basco, Wisconsin.

quick to formulate conclusions about the type of stories in sf magazines, using the covers as a basis for those conclusions, which are mistaken, to say the least.

The stories:

1) *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep*. Excellent. If it would have been clearer, it might have been a classic.

2) *Colony of the Unfit*.

3) *Chimera World*. Keep it up, Ed., Keep it up.

4) *Mind-Stealers of Pluto*. Farrell is getting better and better.

5) *Invader from Infinity*. A very clever way to get rid of an alien invader.

6) *Doorway to Kal-Jmar*.

7) *The Hairy Ones*. That world-within-a-world idea was a little hard to swallow, though.

8) *Lazarus Come Forth*. The ending was too hazy.

9) *Double-Cross*. I didn't understand that marked paper business at the end.

That's all I have to say, except that I'd like to get in touch with any N. O. fans.

Fictionally yours,

EMILE E. GREENLEAF JR.  
The Mad Professor,

## FORTY PERCENTER!

581 Hughes  
Memphis, Tenn.

DEAR PEACOCK:

I note, not without a certain amount of amusement, that despite the ravings, rantings, pleadings, threats and divers other mouthings of the fans; that you continue on in your merry way of presenting the monster-nude-heroine-rescuing-hero cover. I don't mind any more—there was a time—and not too long ago—when I actually had hopes of something more conservative along cover lines, but now that I've learned of the bees, birds, little flowers, (not Fiorello) and undraped damsels flitting about in the utter cold of outer space, I no longer care. You might, with my permission, use lepers for models; perhaps you have been. Who knows?

May I offer to you or one of your writers a simple story plot? The idea may be a bit tainted with overuse, but then, as every one knows, the government is requesting us to make things last. I presume that applies to sf plots also. The Plot: Hero blasts off for distant planet with high ambitions of breaking up dope smuggling ring. Enroute he discovers beautiful, bra-and-scanty clad girl stowaway. Under ordinary circumstances this situation shows interesting possibilities—but our hero is made of sterner stuff and, incidentally, is probably a eunuch. I can think of no other reason for such outrageously decorous conduct. Anyhow the only beauty that disturbs our hero is the unmatched loveliness of the celestial bodies. Of course, one might call a bra-and-scanty clad girl a celestial body, but if our hero's a eunuch then dammit he's a eunuch and it wouldn't matter if our bra-and-scanty clad girl were a Centaur. (highly improbable) Nothing is gonna excite this guy. So merrily we smash through the inky blackness of outer space. Soon in our smashing way we smash into an uninhabited rogue planet, and our hero and bra-and-scanty clad girl are stranded. Now here is perhaps the best place to end the story. And so I will. If this plot is found usable I shall expect my usual forty percent.

Dammit! I want an original.

ART R. SEHNERT.

# THE MILLENNIUM!

14038 Lewis Rd.  
Clio, Mich.

DEAR EDITOR:

May one of your most devoted readers poke a timid head into yon Verbal Barrage? I'm one of those most rare mortals—a contented reader. I like the covers, I like the stories, I like the illustrations and I like the Editor. I defy anyone to call me a moron. Naturally, I have my likes and dislikes, but I don't feel that a story that doesn't quite throw me into ecstasy, deserves the stink bombs that are tossed into your lap every issue.

After all, Science Fiction, Fantasy or anything out of the order, is supposedly intended for readers with enough grey matter to digest it. And isn't it super the way we, the Faithful, are being justified after all these years? Rocket ships are now more than a visionary dream. And according to some of the articles issued recently, the home of the future will make the far fetched ideas of fantasy writers, look as outmoded as the bustle. Let's all rear back and say "I told you so!"

Being a woman has its drawbacks, but all I've got to say is, when the first rocket ship is launched into the Void, even if it is named the "Star Gazing Suicides," I'd like to be on it!

Sincerely,  
RUBY McDONALD.

# VIZZUPLEMENT!

1617 N. Philip St.,  
Phila. 22, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is absolutely my first misstep; the very first time I have committed a letter to the Vizigraph. I wouldn't have done it this time, being the laziest fan on earth, had I not been struck with an idea of surpassing brilliance, even for me.

I know you must have a lot of letters left over after picking out the dozen or so that you publish in the Vizi each issue. Some of them must be as good as the ones you use, and all of them ought to be interesting.

I know that these writers would like to see their letters published, so that other fans could hear of their ideas (not, as the estimable creep Buchanan said, to see their names in print.) Well, I am possessed of a mimeograph, with which I hope to put out a fanzine of my own shortly. I would like to mimeo all these letters in the form of a fanzine, to be called Vizigraph Supplement. It would be published for PLANET fans especially, and would contain only their epistles. Any PLANET fan could get in, but no other material would be used.

This would be a substitute for the idea of a PLANET-sponsored club, put forward a while back. Such a club would be impractical, but this idea would unite PLANET fans just as effectively. PLANET fans, and what might be called Vizigraph fans, are a rather special group, I think, and deserve some sort of bond.

Why not put the idea to your readers, and get their reaction?

If the idea is acceptable, here's how it would work. You would pick your Vizi letters for each issue, and simply bundle the rest off to me. (If the fan writing did not mention in his letter that he would allow its publication in the Supplement, I'd ask his permission, if I didn't know him.) The Supplement would consist of several mimeoed pages, each letter in full and any comment I might feel necessary—not more than a sentence

or two of comment. Also, each letter would be illustrated if anything in it was worth artistic endeavor. It would come out several times between each PLANET issue, and would cost possibly a nickel.

I'll be glad to make any revisions of this idea that the readers suggest, and to incorporate any ideas they may have. Give 'em the notion and let it mill around. And please, 4s!, don't be mad at me. I know there is already a letter mag. I don't want to feud with anybody over this idea, but I don't think I'm doing fandom any serious damage by making this suggestion.

Sincerely,  
SAMUEL MASON.

What do you say, Vizifans? Give me a reaction, and we'll see what gives. We'll play ball with you, any way you wish.

THE EDITOR.

# CONCEITED HAMEL!

2090 East Tremont Ave.,  
Ny 62, Ny.

DEAR EDITOR:

Although I realize that the Buchanan *thing* is *passé*, I have just realized something that changed my opinion of Buchy very slightly. Isn't it true that if I really wanted to tell you how I liked or disliked PLANET STORIES I could see you personally and tell you as I once did? But no, I am a little egotistical fiend who simply must see my name in the magazine.

The Viz was quite dull this time. First place is quite difficult to choose as so many of the letters read the same. . . . But Karden did do a good job, so throw an original his way. Of course Kennedy cops second place, with Stoy third. Many interesting letters tho. . . . But dated.

Shall we skip the cover. Once Parkhurst is enough. . . . Twice Parkhurst! "#\$%! I like Doolin's style. (Helup!) Yeah, it's something like the 1936 Dold or Marchioni. And that's pretty good! Murphy Anderson did a good job on some of the art, especially the one on page 29. Potter is good! Give him better scenes to do tho. . . .

As to the fiction . . . (There was fiction, I think . . .) It all was awful. But the ones that were tolerated by yawrz truly were: *Lazarus Come Forth* (not bad at all), ye ed's missive, and DePina's, altho could have been shorter. DePina is the only author in the issue with the exception of Bradbury who actually knew how to use words. (Saboteur. Ed.) Childish, simple, sentences were used in almost all of the shorts! Especially that Whittington one. I take back what I said about it all being awful. Some was enjoyable. But there was nothing outstanding. Nothing to really make a hit with the fans. KOTDS was about the only thing in the issue that can be talked about, and talked about well. It was written in the usual silvery DePina manner. It tended to stretch, but it was able to hold the reader's interest quite well.

Rocklynn's coming. That's good . . . Missed the Bracket tale in this issue . . . Should be a law that she has to have one in every issue!

I should like to see more of Mr. Meek. Quite an unusual character. Not at all run-of-the-mill, as you would expect such a personage to be.

Print this! (Because I am conceited and must see my name . . . . .)

No kiddin',  
AUSTIN HAMEL.

## OUR ADVERTISING!

130 W. 183 St.  
Bronx 53, New York.

DEAR EDITOR:

I enjoyed the last issue of PLANET STORIES very much.

*The Soul Eaters* by William Conover had a remarkable resemblance to the work of Albert De Pina. Is this merely a coincidence? The plot was not new, but the manner of handling the story raised it, in my estimation, considerably. Ingels' drawing was good; I think he is improving.

*Mr. Meek Plays Polo* was humorous, but I am getting just a little tired of this series. I am especially tired when I think of Clifford D. Simak's excellent *Message from Mars*. He writes both types of stories well, but I think that he writes straight adventure far better than humor. The drawing was in keeping with the story.

*The Citadel of Death* by Carl Selwyn seemed to be rushing to its conclusion. I would have liked it better if it had gone at a more leisurely pace. Perhaps Mr. Selwyn hurried it along purposely, because of the nature of the story—that is my most charitable explanation. Elias seems to be changing his style of drawing.

*Highwayman of the Void* by Dirk Wylie was an ordinary story, but very capably done. There is something about Mr. Wylie's style of writing that makes the oldest, stalest plot good reading. And this plot was not particularly new. Doolin's drawing was superb: the first illustration by him that I really liked.

*Men Without a World* by Joseph Farrell seemed between humor and straight adventure. This is not a masterpiece, but it is a good story. The picture was not very good.

*Doctor Universe* by Carl Jacobi was a very good story. I especially enjoyed Miss Flowers' discussion of science fiction plots. The illustration was nicely done, but isn't Ingels being overworked? Three drawings in one issue is a lot.

*The Eyes of Thor* by Henry Kuttner is a minor classic. The characterization, the plot, and, most important, the descriptions were wonderfully done. This story, in my opinion, belongs on the same list as *Vassals of the Master World*: the list of classics of science fiction. Unfortunately, Doolin's drawing, although not bad, was not the equal of the story.

Now for the letters.

First, Wilms Herbert, although I think that "blood and thunder" adventure is not wholly undesirable when it is well written.

Second, Alan Mannion. This was a fine letter, but the punctuation made it hard on the eyes. Please, Mr. Mannion, less of an "all-out" effort on punctuation, next time.

Third, Georgia O'Neill. The beginning of the letter was rather unkind, though.

I would like to congratulate PLANET STORIES on the quality of its advertising; nothing acutely unpleasant. I also rejoice over the small quantity of advertising; I hate magazines that are two-thirds ads and one-third second-rate stories (I don't mean that PLANET doesn't contain some second-rate stories, but at least the number is not large). In fact, PLANET STORIES is my favorite science-fiction magazine. Of course the covers are garish, but so are the covers of the other S F magazines.

Sincerely,  
ROSE JACOBOWITZ.

## MORONIC SEMI-FANS!

1207 E. Henry St.,  
Savannah, Ga.

DEAR SCOTT:

Pardon the informality, but Joe Kennedy wrote an article for my fuz about his visit to your offices, and I feel I almost know you personally. That also is the reason for this letter. I said in the last one that you probably wouldn't hear from me for some time. But when I read things like what Joe wrote, it changes my views and I feel I have to write now. (Send the report along. I'd like to know how I rate. Ed.)

I haven't read the stories in the Winter ish, but since you have been asking for something other than ratings, it makes no matter. Besides, what does anyone care about my opinions on that matter, anyway? So shall get down to the business at hand. Namely, Dick Hetschel.

Before I go any further, let me say that I have nothing against Dick personally. In fact, he has been kind enough to contribute a poem to aforementioned fuz. It's merely a statement—or rather statements—he made in the Winter PS. I refer to his remarks about "All stf fans are morons," etc.

Mr. Hetschel is not (he doesn't know it but he isn't) really speaking of stf fans. The people he's talking about are nothing but "letter hacks." They are not really fans. Or some of them are, yes. Joe Kennedy, for instance. But an stf fan who pours letters in to pro-mags is a rare thing. Of the (approximately) two or three hundred fans, there are only about a dozen who write letters to editors. But the majority of letter writers are not true fans. They are more semi-fans. Therefore, I do not think it fair to say "fans are morons" when he really means semi-fans. What about it, Dick?

Now I know what a lot of the "true fans" I referred to are saying if they are reading this. Something like: "Listen to Kessel. In fandom four months and already he thinks he's something. These new fen!" Well, I am not trying to classify myself as an stf fan. In the sense I have been referring to them, that is. I am merely correcting Dick's choice of the word fan. I think (perhaps I'm wrong) that semi-fan would be more appropriate. If anybody disagrees, well good gosh, I ain't scared to admit I'm wrong.

And now I would like to rave about Potter for a while. Peak, you have something here. He's new, I take it. I don't recall seeing him around before. Or is he from an adventure mag. (Yes—Jungle—Northwest—Action, Ed.) Looks like he might be. More pix by him and less by Doolin.

I think I shall do a little rating, anyhow. Of the pix, anyway.

Doolin's on pp. 2 and 3 weren't too bad. However, the only part of it that I like is the helmets.

Anderson's best for the ish was the one for *Doorway to Kal-Imar*. The others by him are hardly worth mentioning.

Kiemle is the usual PLANET type. Need I say more?

Potter's best was for *The Hairy Ones*. His others were also tops. (This particular one rated as his best because of the man and the background.)

And now the time has come for me to return to the depths from whence I came. Naw, I can't do that. That's too old. I shall instead return to my glorious heights. Nope. Don't like that either. Oh well, I'll just quit and let it go at that.

WALT KESSEL,  
*The Flying Freak.*

# HASTA LA VISTA!

Box 2392  
W. Gastonia, N. C.

DEAR MR. PEACOCK:

You could have knocked  
Me over with a *peacock's*  
Feather,  
When I saw my little  
Offering in the superb Fall  
Issue of PLANET.  
The ole lady  
(That's my wife)  
Was right pleased, too,  
And she thanks you—  
From the bottom of her  
Lovely heart.  
This is the last letter  
That I will write deah  
Ole PLANET,  
(Sweet Alma Mater)  
As a civilian.  
As of June 26, I will  
Be one of the cogs in  
Uncle Sam's war machine  
As a part of our dear  
Uncle's Navy—  
I still hope to be able  
To read PLANET, tho;  
And I will,  
As often as it comes out.  
For the best letters in the Fall  
PLANET, Give the originals to:  
(1) Joe Kennedy  
(2) Alan Mannion  
(3) Chas. McNutt.  
Now, if those gentlemen will  
pass the Cigars  
Or the Cup-of-Joy,  
I will write two letters  
And vote for them twice.  
Bill Conover is the  
Winner as far as the yarns  
Are concerned.  
Simak's and Jacobi's  
Screwball yarns come second  
And third.  
Kuttner's offering is in  
A class itself—Kuttner  
is always good,  
And when he's in PLANET,  
He's better.  
Now, I know your eyes are as  
Tired as mine—  
Besides, the ole lady,  
(That's my wife)  
Has gone to bed  
And I can't write  
Without her sweet presence  
To inspire me. Bye Now.  
Wilkie Conner.

## KENNEDY'S PAL!

DEAR WILBUR:

On my way home, I happened to look on the stands.

(the rest goes unsaid)

My only comment on this is that I haven't yet completed reading it so I can't form opinions which no-one will look at anyway and thereby waste your time and mine.

"Happening" to look at the Vizigraph, I notice that Kennedy has again received the honor of being the first one in it. Why don't you feature him in the Feature Flash? ((For that little

bit of advertising I collect two bits from the erstwhile Joe. Eh, Joe?))

Again "happening" to look at the Viz, I noted what you meant when you said The Viz was developing a bad taste. I suggest that the writers of those epistles suck oranges or other citrus fruits to take the bad taste away.

This cargo of letters was slightly boring, so after retching a few times, I decided to stop reading the rest. (Mmmm. It appears to me that Mr. W. S. Peacock might possibly have the same idea.)

Gad, just looking thru the batch of letters, you can *smell* the riff-raff being thrown around. Since Wilbur insists that any more letters of this type shall immediately greet the trash-basket, I will desist from the subject except for a few parting, or rather, carefree words; come what may, readers will be readers whether you want something or I want something or if Roosevelt will get elected—(Gad, what am I getting myself into!). Anyway, I get a kick out of all these "goings on because I can look on and say to myself, "—" By which I imply that you take a thing as is, and not as you want. So I wish, Wilbur, you'd make a declaration of some sort saying that we (the readers) ought to stop acting like fools and enjoy ourselves instead of quarrelling, or whatever you may call it. Enuff of the subject. I feel my stomach coming up again.

(Use this space for telephone numbers)\*\*\*  
.....

Burp. Pardon.

Give Kennedy first place. He's my pal, so why not? He writes as if he had not a care in the world, and it's doing the Viz good. You know why

Give Ray second. Even tho I haven't yet read his letter, it looks good, as He, er, he writes little about the mag. The little that there is good, therefore my opinion.

And last but not least, give me third. I know I haven't got a letter in Winter Issue, but, er, I'm expecting—well, er,—oh hell! forget it. Give Kennedy third too.

Oh, yes, before I forget, I'm forming a new club called, — well, the club is so mystic and dark that I don't know the name. It's a secret. I made up the club, but that's beside the point. Anyone can join as long as he believes in the fans' credo. I'll shorten it, as it would be too long to fit into, or rather, onto the page.

"I believe that Earth is going to be invaded. Mars and all the planets. Besides, I believe that the atom is really a world, each of them (the atoms, of course) ready to spring upon us and conquer us. Gee, I'm scared." Taken from Don Wollheim's fanzine, "Vertigo." I *know* Don will forgive me? (Atoms—worlds? You mean systems, Bub? Ed.)

Burp. Pardon.

I'm glad to see Conway's back. Yeah. (Ooops, I slipped.)

I gotta go and do the kitchen floor now, ((And dammit! I'm not kidding!)) so I part with the famous saying, "Burp. Pardon," and leave you to go from the darkness whence I came. (Betcha thought I was gonna say—nope! I won't say it!)

As drolly usual,

AL WEINSTEIN.  
(Genius among other things)



## G.I. BILL!

In the field outside of  
Alexander La.

DEAR SIRs.

I find your magazine very interesting—and I read it at most every chance I get, but in the kind of an outfit I'm in, you haven't much time to read an' have few chances to finish the long stories, it is hard to start a story an' not finish it. I believe if you made a magazine of more short stories that you could sell more issues to men in the service.

This is all for now but would be very interested in hearing from other readers of this magazine. This is my first time in writing to a magazine—so please excuse errors. My address is Pvt. Bill Pullin, A.S.N.—35096899, Co. "C" 652 Tank Destroyer Bn., Camp Polk, La.

Yours truly,  
BILL PULLIN.

## THE NAME IS 'SCOTT'!

1348 Lafayette,  
Denver, Colorado

DEAR WILBUR:

Aw right, aw right, I can take a hint, no more crusades against Buchanon. I'm disarming. The dove of peace floats over my head, my battle flags are at half mast, my battle cries silenced (but not forever, armed neutrality is the watchword). It was fun, though. I gotta admit Buchanon put up a good fight while he lasted. But as all forces of evil and hypocrisy eventually go down before forces of good and truth Buchanon surrendered. All is quiet on the Vizigraph front. (Taps played softly now, ta, ta, ta.)

On to pleasanter subjects. Thanks and flowers to Hetschel for his compliments on my letters? It's all right Ed. I'm not hinting for originals. Kindly note that, voters. However I got to admit a few more would go nice with my present collection (drool, drool).

On to the Winter Issue:

Stories; *Colony of the Unfit*, 96%, new & good, more. *Mind Stealers of Pluto*, 94%, good, interesting and well written. *Chimera World*, 83%, fair, old plot done over well. *Keeper of the Deathless Sleep*, 81%, fair, old plot, interesting. *The Hairy Ones*, 80%, good, but too short, hasty. *Double Cross*, and *Lazarus Come Forth*, Tie, 74%, old, hasty, poorly written. *Invader from Infinity*, 70%, passable, poor plot, hasty. *Doorway to Kal-Jmar*, 50% really Wilbur!

Illustrations; Poor, too sexy, no relation to story in most cases.

Vizigraph; Very good. My vote is for 1st Stanley Skirvin, 2nd Joe Kennedy, 3rd Dick Hetschel. S. T. Brown, 3rd had the best letter but I can't vote for him of course. (I'm him.)

Now, Wilbur, I'm not one to criticize pictures of fair sex in extremely scanty clothing, being a member of Local 186 Wolves Union C.I.O. affiliate, but really when I have to hide my issues of PLANET STORIES so that my little sister won't see them and get the wrong ideas on life I think your art department could use a little less sex and more science in their drawings. Granted it's pleasant to draw pictures of (volupt (whoops can't spell it)) beautiful girls in little or no clothing but Ed. please tone the sex appeal down a bit. Do your artists use models, by the way? If so where do I apply for a job with PLANET as artist supreme?

Where's the Ringer Family? They're the best part of your mag. (They are back. Ed.)

This letter's dull, Wilbur, and I know it but there's nothing to write about. No Buchanon, no nobody. Somebody do something!

PLEASE PRINT THIS, WILBUR

Boredly yours,

S. T. BROWN, 3RD.  
(The Deadly Denverite)

## HUCKLEBERRY PIE, YET!

201 North Wilbur Ave.,  
Sayre, Penn.

DEAR EDITOR:

Seeing as how the old arguments and fights among fans are wearing sorta thin with you, I thought I'd break a long silence and write a different type of letter—a problem letter.

Dear Mr. Antony—I mean, Dear Mr. Peacock—this is my problem:

About six months ago I decided to build a time machine, so I gathered information on construction from all my old SF mags from away back, and proceeded to build one.

It worked fine, except for one thing. Every time I went backwards in time I always seemed to meet either a great grandsire or a great grandmother. Invariably we got mad at each other and got into an awful fight, and I always came out on top. But whenever I killed a grandparent who hadn't gotten married yet, it was really very annoying, and I'll tell you why.

Every time this happened it cut off my phylum (line of descent to you Vizifans) and killed me, because then I hadn't been born yet. I fell straight back and back at the dizzying speed of 186 quintillion miles a second, and smashed bang!—into a sort of centrifuge. (Eh? Ed.) This has happened so often that I am covered with terrible bruises.

Well, anyhow—this centrifuge-thing which the inhabitants thereof called The Wheel of Karma went round and round for several millennia until centrifugal force finally threw me off.

Next thing I knew I was kicking my legs and waving my fists and hollering like anything, because some dope with a black bag was holding me upside down and smacking me upon my derriere.

You have no idea what an awful waste of time it is to go all through the years from infancy to adulthood before you can again rebuild a time machine. It gets so monotonous.

I wonder if some fan with a scientific mind would be kind enough to point out my error, so that every time I travel into the past I won't have to commit homicide, thereby getting all mixed up with Eastern metaphysics and things. It's an awful nuisance.

A few comments on the Winter ish of PLANET. I liked it as well as ever. The stories were entertaining. The inside illustrations are beginning to be reminiscent of certain comic strips and the characters in them. The cover BEMS were swell this time, better than average. So was the girl. I am glad she had some meat on her bones. She is very pretty, except for having lilac-colored teeth. But perhaps she had been eating huckleberry pie.

Sincerely,  
LORETTA ADELE BEASLEY.



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**J. G. O'BRIEN**  
Atlas Champion Cup Winner  
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**J. E. SMITH, President National Radio Institute**

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